

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Vol.1

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**





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Cast of Characters

Summary of Part Four:

At the Royal Academy, Rozemyne has become both a problem child and a top-ranking student. She took ownership of the library's magic tools through a blessing, played alter against a greater duchy, advised royalty on matters of romance, defeated a Darkness feybeast, and healed the Ehrenfest gathering spot, among so many other things. Meanwhile at the guidance of the Sovereign knight commander, who knows that Ferdinand is a seed of Adalgisa, the king orders Ferdinand to leave Ehrenfest and marry into another duchy. Now, Ferdinand must endure a new life in Ahrensbach.



Wilfried

Sylvester's son, Rozemyne's older brother, and a third-year.



Rozemyne

The protagonist. She grew a little and now looks about eight, but she's the same on the inside and will do anything to read books. A third-year.

Ehrenfest's Archducal Family



Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.



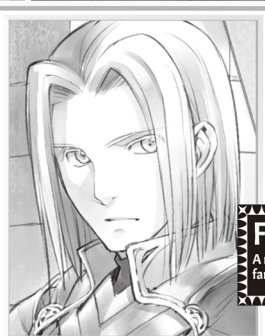
Florencia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.



Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister, and a second-year.



Melchior

Sylvester's son. Rozemyne's little brother.

Bonifatius

Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

Ferdinand

A member of the Ehrenfest archducal family. Sent to Ahrensbach by royal decree.

**Rihyarda**

Head attendant. An archnoble who cared for Ferdinand, Sylvester, and Karstedt when they were kids.

**Lieseleta**

Angelica's little sister and a sixth-year apprentice medattendant.

**Brunhilde**

A fifth-year apprentice archattendant.

**Roderick**

A third-year apprentice medscholar. Gave his name.

**Philine**

A third-year apprentice layscholar.

**Leonore**

A sixth-year apprentice archknight.

**Judithe**

A fourth-year apprentice medknight.

**Theodore**

Judithe's little brother and a first-year apprentice medknight.

Hartmut.....An archscholar and the new High Priest. Otilie's son.

Cornelius.....Karstedt's son and an archknight.

Angelica.....Lieseleta's older sister and a medknight.

Damuel.....A layknight.

Otilie.....Hartmut's mother and an archattendant.

Rozemyne's Retainers**Ehrenfest Dormitory**

Hirschur.....Ehrenfest's dormitory supervisor. Professor from the scholar course.

Ignaz.....A fourth-year apprentice archscholar serving Wilfried.

Alexis.....A sixth-year apprentice archknight serving Wilfried.

Marianne.....A fourth-year apprentice archscholar serving Charlotte.

Rudolf.....A sixth-year apprentice medknight serving Charlotte.

Natalie.....A fifth-year apprentice archattendant serving Charlotte.

Matthias.....A fifth-year apprentice medknight in the former Veronica faction.

Laurenz.....A fourth-year apprentice medknight in the former Veronica faction.

Muriella.....A fifth-year apprentice medscholar in the former Veronica faction.

Gretia.....A fourth-year apprentice medattendant in the former Veronica faction.

Barthold.....A fifth-year apprentice medscholar in the former Veronica faction.

Cassandra.....A fourth-year apprentice medattendant in the former Veronica faction.

Students from Other Duchies

Lestilaut.....A sixth-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.
Hannelore.....A third-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.
Kenntrips.....A fourth-year apprentice scholar serving Lestilaut.
Rasantark.....A third-year apprentice guard knight serving Lestilaut.
Clarissa.....A sixth-year apprentice archscholar from Dunkelfelger.
Ortwin.....A third-year archduke candidate from Drewanchel.
Detlind.....A sixth-year archduke candidate from Ahrensbach. Georgine's daughter.
Raimund.....A fourth-year apprentice medscholar from Ahrensbach. Hirschur's disciple.
Lueuradi.....A third-year apprentice archscholar from Jossbrenner.

Other Royal Academy Affiliates

Eglantine.....The second prince's first wife.
Rauffen.....Dunkelfelger's dormitory supervisor. Professor from the knight course.
Gundolf.....Drewanchel's dormitory supervisor. Professor from the scholar course.
Fraularm.....Ahrensbach's dormitory supervisor. Professor from the scholar course.
Solange.....A medlibrarian of the Royal Academy.
Schwartz.....A library magic tool.
Weiss.....A library magic tool.

Nobles from Other Duchies

Sigiswald.....The Sovereignty's first prince.
Anastasius.....The Sovereignty's second prince.
Hildebrand.....The Sovereignty's third prince.
Raublut.....The Sovereign knight commander.
Oswin.....Anastasius's head attendant.
Arthur.....Hildebrand's head attendant.

Cordula.....Hannelore's head attendant.
Adolphine.....A member of the Drewanchel archducal family.
Georgine.....Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.
Letizia.....An archduke candidate from Ahrensbach.

Ehrenfest's Nobility

Karstedt.....Ehrenfest's knight commander. Rozemyne's noble father.
Elvira.....Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.
Eckhart.....Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.
Justus.....Ferdinand's head attendant and scholar. Rihyarda's son.
Veronica.....Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.
Gabriele.....Veronica's mother. A former member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.

Rozemyne's Personnel

Hugo..... Rozemyne's personal chef.
Ella..... Rozemyne's personal chef.
Rosina..... Rozemyne's personal musician.

Other

Tuuli..... Myne's older sister. Hairpin craftswoman.
Freida..... Gustav's granddaughter.
Wilma..... In charge of the temple's orphanage. Artist.

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Characters

Prologue

The Children of the Former Veronica Faction

The Fellowship Gatherings (Third Year)

Passing Classes

The New Librarian

Practical: Divine Protections of the Gods

Music and Everyone's Rituals

Discussing Divine Protections with Hirschur

Beginning the Archduke Candidate Course

Dedication Whirling (Third Year)

Hirschur's Meeting with the Aub

Researching Rituals and an Update on the Purge

Finishing the Archduke Candidate Lessons

Passing Professor Gundolf's Classes

Gretia's Circumstances and Gathering Ingredients

Professor Fraularm's Class

Hirschur's Personal Librarian

A Request from Royalty

Tea Party for Bookworms

Tea Party with Dunkelfelger

Replies

Epilogue

Fantasy versus Reality

Finding Purpose and the Guardians of Knowledge

Map of Ehrenfest Duchy

Map of Yurgenschmidt

Afterword

A Comfy Life with My Family by You Shiina

The 3rd Ascendance of a Bookworm Character Poll!

Bonus High Resolution Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Prologue

It was the spring Archduke Conference, and the baptized Hildebrand was about to have his debut. It was commonplace for nobles to debut during winter socializing—but royals were debuted in an auditorium within the Royal Academy, in the presence of the archducal couples of every duchy and their retainers. Those being debuted would repeat a lengthy greeting in front of all those gathered and then offer music to the gods.

“Your music, Hildebrand,” the king directed.

“Yes, Father.”

The prince’s harspiel playing went well, much to his relief; he could actually feel the tension drain from his body once he was done. He had already needed to meet the high expectations of the noble children, but it had been even more intimidating than he had expected to play in front of so many people, especially when they were measuring him up with narrowed eyes.

“And now, I shall make an announcement,” the king continued.

It was then revealed that Hildebrand was engaged—to Letizia, an archduke candidate from Ahrensbach whom he had neither met nor even heard anything about. His mother had told him about this in advance of the announcement, but Hildebrand still struggled to suppress his own feelings and maintain his regal smile as the audience widened their eyes in surprise.

The fact that I’m marrying an aub means I won’t be a royal anymore.

Hildebrand understood that he had been raised to one day become a vassal... but he had assumed that he would take a wife in the Sovereignty and assist his family as a royal, like his half-brother Anastasius. He had never thought that he would be going to a duchy he had never seen before to wed an aub.

Once he came of age, he would cease to be a royal entirely. He could not even imagine what his new environment would be like, and it was precisely because there were so many unknowns that he felt more fear and discomfort than usual.

“My sincerest congratulations on your engagement. Now, those of Ahrensbach may be at ease.”

“I did not expect your debut to be accompanied with news of an engagement. My felicitations.”

Those gathered offered up various congratulations, but Hildebrand

did not share in the celebratory mood whatsoever. Still, he quashed his dissatisfaction and accepted their words with a smile; he had been told to never let his true emotions show.

Even so... I wanted to pick my own partner.

The Sovereignty was still ablaze with talk of Anastasius's passionate proposal to Eglantine and the song about the Goddess of Light that he had offered to her. After seeing how close they were at home and hearing the court musicians sing of their romance, Hildebrand had begun to think that marriages founded on love were a good thing indeed.

Hildebrand recalled the amusement on his mother's face when she had told him about everything she had done to obtain the marriage she had sought, while they listened to songs made in the new couple's honor. After all that, he could not help but want more of a say in whom he would take as his wife. He didn't want to aimlessly follow his father's orders and spend his life with someone he had never even met.

If the choice were mine to make...

One girl immediately came to the prince's mind. He could already picture her slender fingers flipping through one page after another, her fluttering eyelashes, and her dark-blue hair that cascaded down her back like the night sky materialized. She was Lady Rozemyne, the Ehrenfest archduke candidate who loved books and was the master of Schwartz and Weiss.

Unfortunately, she was already due to marry someone named Wilfried.

Rozemyne must have felt the same way when her parents ordered that she be engaged.

Hildebrand knew that he could not defy a decree from the king himself, and he certainly had not been raised to do something so defiant. But even so, he could not help feeling sad about the whole situation.

After returning to his room—the same polite smile still plastered on his face—Hildebrand was changed out of his regal socializing attire and into his regular clothes. That alone was enough to ease his anxieties, but as his smile faded, he found that it was soon replaced with a displeased frown.

"I see that you are rather down, Prince Hildebrand," said Arthur, his head attendant. "However, the king has decreed it."

Hildebrand glared at Arthur with eyes full of displeasure; he did not need to be reminded of what he already knew. He had been told time and time again to act as royalty should, and after maintaining a smile throughout the entire event, the least he wanted was a moment of peace.

“Arthur, I will be in my hidden room for some time.”

“Understood. I will summon you when dinner is ready.”

Several days later, Hildebrand received a meeting request from Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander. Hildebrand did not much want to meet with anyone, but he was in no position to refuse—the purpose of the meeting was for Raublut to pass on a message from the king.

“I wish to congratulate you about your engagement, Prince Hildebrand.”

“Your words are appreciated, Raublut.”

“Though I can tell from the look on your face that you are less than pleased about it,” the knight commander added, his lips curling into a wry smile that caused the scar above his left cheekbone to move slightly.

Raublut and Hildebrand were having their meeting in the latter’s room, and the two were anything but strangers—they had known each other since Hildebrand was born. It was for these reasons that the prince’s true feelings had unknowingly leaked through into his expression. Upon realizing this, he straightened up and forced the emotion from his face.

Smiling at the young boy’s efforts to be a proper royal, Raublut held out a small box. “A gift, for our sad prince. Perhaps it will raise your spirits.”

Hildebrand was used to Raublut bringing him fun little toys—things that fired out a tiny projectile when opened or could only be unlocked through a very particular sequence of actions. The prince beamed in response before turning to Arthur behind him, who took the box, confirmed it was not dangerous, and then handed it back.

“Thank you, commander.”

“It’s no problem,” Raublut replied, sounding especially casual. “I just don’t want to see you so down, Prince Hildebrand.”

Arthur simply nodded in agreement.

“Now then—may I begin?”

Raublut sat up straight and conveyed the king’s message: Hildebrand was to probe Rozemyne for information about the Grutrissheit. Ferdinand of Ehrenfest had been spotted in the Royal Academy’s library, and the fact that he and Rozemyne had searched through the files of past librarians had convinced people that there was something there.

“Lady Rozemyne seized control of royal magic tools, and Lord Ferdinand is controlling her from the shadows,” Raublut concluded.

“Rozemyne became their master by chance, Raublut—and she is filling them with mana out of the goodness of her heart,” Hildebrand

retorted.

Rozemyne was passionate about books, happier in the library than anywhere else, and so clearly beloved by Schwartz and Weiss. She had said that she was donating her mana so that the librarian, Solange, would not need to go without magic tools, as this outcome would only make it harder for her to visit the library.

“There is not a noble alive who would donate their mana purely out of goodwill,” Raublut said. “And even if she were, it is doubtless the case that she is not acting of her own accord. Lord Ferdinand is pulling the strings and must be treated with caution.”

Hildebrand nodded, now beginning to understand. Rozemyne may have held good intentions, but they could not guarantee the same about the person guiding her every move. Children were prone to being manipulated, since they were so very impressionable. That was why royals and archduke candidates had retainers by their side at all times.

“Due in part to Ahrensbach’s request, we have successfully torn Lord Ferdinand away from Ehrenfest,” Raublut continued. “Going forward, it should become clear whether Lady Rozemyne truly is acting out of compassion.”

“I see. That sounds wise,” Hildebrand replied, though he harbored no doubts that she was as innocent as she seemed. He knew from experience that she was interested only in books. Her golden eyes would so eagerly trace the letters before her, and she became almost oblivious to her surroundings—even when in the presence of a royal such as himself. Once they could confirm that nobody was manipulating her from the shadows, then there would be no reason to doubt her at all.

“We are sending an archnoble librarian to the Royal Academy this year,” Raublut said, “and if Lady Rozemyne relinquishes ownership of the magic tools to them without protest, then we will no longer have cause to suspect her. There is no reason for someone acting out of goodwill to contest the idea.”

“I hope that librarian is a girl...” Hildebrand muttered. He had settled for being a helper almost entirely because he did not want to be called “milady.” It would be sad if someone were forced into being addressed as a girl due to a royal decree.

Raublut blinked in surprise. “We *are* sending a woman—Prince Anastasius was very particular about that. I did not expect you to share his opinion, Prince Hildebrand.”

“I just do not want a man to have to endure being called ‘milady’ all the time,” Hildebrand replied. He was unsure what reasons Anastasius had.

All of a sudden, Raublut leaned forward as if about to disclose a

secret. “In truth, Lady Eglantine is being sent to the Royal Academy to instruct the archduke candidate course. There, she will assist us by gathering intelligence from Lady Rozemyne. Prince Anastasius simply wants her to be in an environment with as many women—or, to be more precise, as few men—as possible. You are on good terms with Lady Rozemyne as well, correct? We would like you to find out what she knows about the relationship between the royal family, the library, and this so-called forbidden archive.”

“I don’t think she knows much at all. I mean, *she* came to *me* for more information. Plus, I won’t be able to show my face at the Royal Academy until socializing season begins, so I don’t think we’ll see much of each other.”

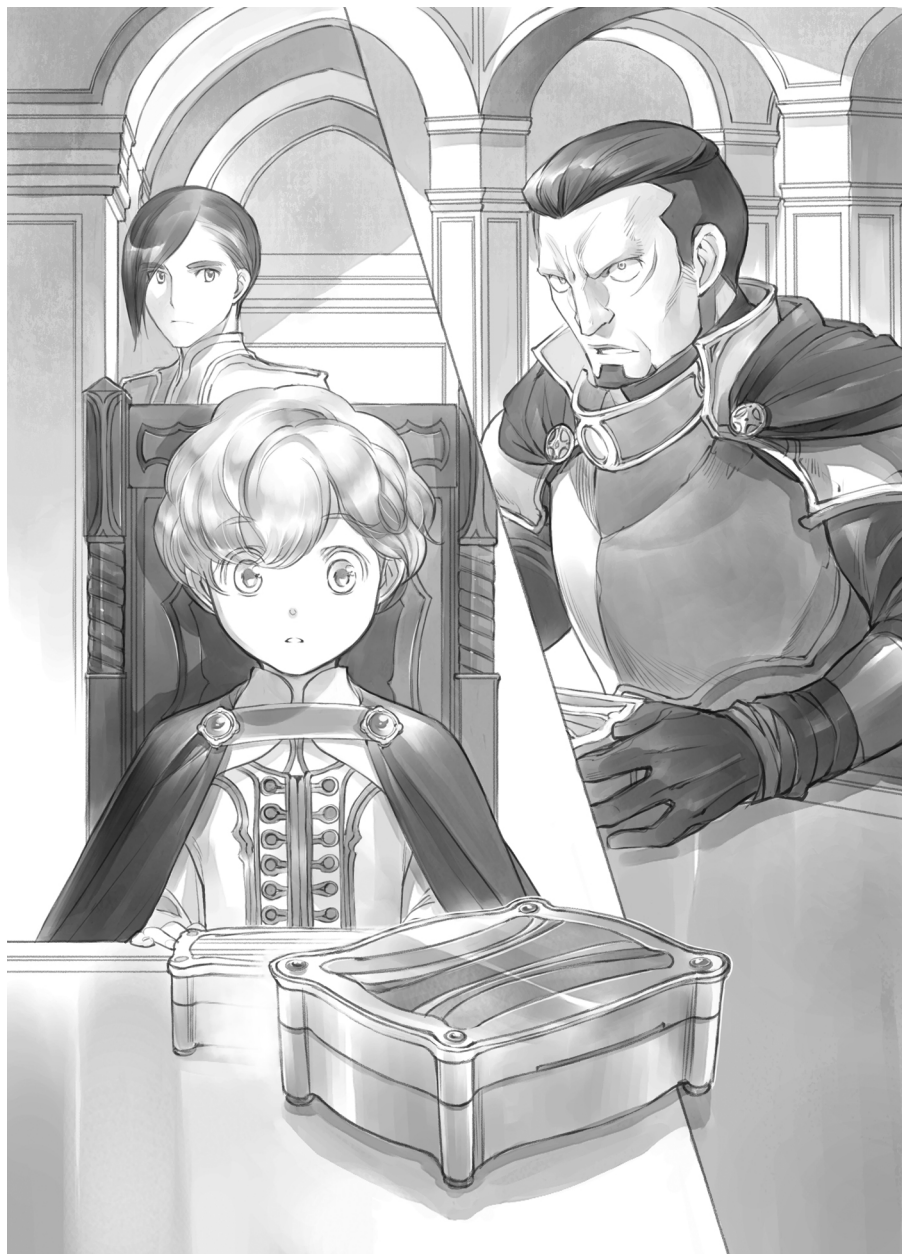
As a third-year student, Rozemyne would need to start devoting her time to a specialty course. Hildebrand still remembered the sadness he had felt when Arthur told him how different things were going to be.

“She may have learned more in the time since then,” Raublut said, “and now that your engagement has been settled, you will have more freedom to move about the Academy.”

Hildebrand was free to enter the public eye in the Royal Academy—but only because his future was now set in stone. It was not something he was particularly happy about.

I should be excited that I’m getting more time with Rozemyne, but now I just feel empty inside.

Raublut, seeing the prince hold in a defeated sigh, held out a magic tool. “Prince Hildebrand, please open this when you next enter your hidden room. The message it contains is a royal secret, I am told. The tool can only be used once, and its contents will not be repeated once you close the lid again. Take care to listen closely.”



“Is this from Father too?”

Raublut merely smiled, placed the magic tool on the table, and then took his leave.

Hildebrand looked between the magic tool and the toy that Raublut had given him. He wanted to postpone listening to the apparent royal secret, since it was probably a lecture or some royal decree that he would rather ignore—and so he first reached for the toy.

“Prince Hildebrand, important matters are best heard first,” Arthur said, stopping him in his tracks. Hildebrand thus put his own desires aside and reached for the magic tool instead.

“I shall go listen to this royal secret.”

“Understood. Take care that you do not miss a single word.”

Hildebrand entered his hidden room, sat on his bench, and then touched the yellow feystone on the magic tool. His mana was sucked in, and a voice began to speak.

“This is a message to my prince, who is so down over his engagement.”

Hildebrand recoiled in shock, and the voice stopped the moment his fingers left the feystone. The person speaking was not his father, the king—it was Raublut. He wondered whether he should continue listening to the message, then steeled his resolve and touched the feystone again.

“If you wish to avoid going to Ahrensbach, keep listening. If you intend to accept the king’s decree, then please close the lid.”

Hildebrand took his hand away from the feystone again and instinctively looked around for somebody to consult with. There was no one there, of course; he was alone in his hidden room. And even if someone had been there, it was unthinkable that he could ask them about defying the king’s orders and resisting his engagement.

Before he knew it, Hildebrand could feel his heart racing. A quiet voice in his head told him to close the lid, but at the same time, he couldn’t avoid the question he had asked himself so many times already.

Do I want to accept the royal decree and go to Ahrensbach...?

“I... don’t want to,” Hildebrand said. And with those words of resolve, he touched the stone again.

“A royal decree can only be canceled by another royal decree, and a king naturally cannot become an aub. You know these things, yes? Thus, if you wish to avoid going to Ahrensbach, then you must take the throne yourself, Prince Hildebrand.”

“Me? King...?” Hildebrand muttered. His head started to spin, but Raublut’s low voice continued nonetheless, urging him to become

king.

“Search for the Grutrissheit—the proof of a true king that King Trauerqual does not have. He who finds it shall become the next ruler without opposition. It will even save King Trauerqual himself, who has suffered to no end due to not having the Grutrissheit.”

Long ago, the king’s half-brother—the second prince at the time—had been recognized as next in line to the throne. His unexpected death had caused many serious problems, and by the midway point of the first and third princes’ feud, the Grutrissheit was nowhere to be found. Hildebrand recalled his father saying on more than one occasion that, had the Grutrissheit not been lost, then the country would have avoided some very brutal conflicts. He had also said that, if the Grutrissheit were to be found, then he would no longer need to be king despite not having been educated for the position or having the tools to carry out his duties.

“So if I find the Grutrissheit and become the true king, I can save Father and avoid going to Ahrensbach?”

“If you take the throne, Prince Hildebrand, then you can nullify the royal decree and marry whomever you choose.”

It was a bewitching offer. Hildebrand could not only help his father, but also save both himself and Rozemyne from their unwanted marriages. It was with this desire to make everyone happy that he decided to follow Raublut’s advice... but at the same time, something in his heart called for him to reconsider. He was being raised as a vassal; seeking the kingship was flying too high.

Hildebrand was torn between two voices—one telling him not to seek the throne, and the other asking whether he really wanted to give up on his one chance to get the future he wanted.

“Should a third prince like me really be aiming to become king?” Hildebrand asked. But the magic tool had no answer for him; it had already served its purpose.

“You look unwell, Hildebrand. Is something worrying you?”

“Mother.”

Hildebrand had seldom seen his mother since being baptized and receiving his own villa. He should have been overjoyed that they were having dinner together, but he had evidently allowed the sadness he was feeling to show on his face.

I wonder if she’ll scold me for not being princely enough...

Hildebrand tensed up, expecting the worst, but his mother’s usually hard expression softened a little instead. She met his gaze, then gently stroked his hair and cheeks, despite having said that she could not be soft on him anymore now that he was baptized.

“If something is on your mind, then please tell me. I am your

mother, after all. We may not spend as much time together now that we live apart, but I think of you more than anyone.”

Hildebrand gazed up at his mother—at her beautiful tresses, which were the same bluish-silver as his own, and her red eyes, which were quietly imploring him to speak.

I might not be able to tell her all of what's going on, but... maybe we can still talk about it a little.

Hildebrand could not help but feel that his mother was urging him down the path he had chosen. After all, she had used a variety of tricky means to marry into royalty and crush the engagement that her family had attempted to force upon her. In short, she had won her happiness and wed the man she had set her sights on.

She should understand my wish to choose the person I marry.

“Mother... there is something I want. Something I might not even be able to get. I understand that my feelings are selfish and that anyone who finds out about them will oppose me. Is it okay for me to keep wanting it anyway?”

His mother’s red eyes widened, then she gave a joyous laugh. “Oh my. I thought you were most rich with your father’s blood, but I see that you are a Dunkelfelgerian through and through.” She brought Hildebrand up onto her lap and started running her fingers through his hair. “Focus your efforts, build your strength, and challenge fate as many times as it takes to get what you want. Such is the Dunkelfelger way.”

“Prince Hildebrand is not from Dunkelfelger, though,” Arthur protested with a sigh. “He is royalty.”

She silenced him with a smile and continued speaking to her son in a kind, soothing voice. “Hildebrand, making one’s selfish desires a reality is no easy feat.”

“Right.”

“First, you must grant large boons to those around you. People are far more likely to help you attain your wish if they have something to gain as well.”

Hildebrand continued to listen to his mother’s advice. To prevent any substantial opposition, he noted, he would need to create a reality in which his needs aligned with those of others. This alone would require a wide variety of strategies.

“Think carefully about how to make those around you your allies,” his mother continued. “Learn well, and obtain the strength required to succeed. Change your approach as many times as it takes. Never give up. Learn, improve, and continue to challenge the impossible. If you are a true Dunkelfelgerian, then this should be more than possible for you.” She clapped her hands on his cheeks and gave him an invincible smile, doing everything in her power to energize

him.

Hildebrand gave a firm nod in response. "I'll do everything I can."

I'll find the Grutrissheit. Then I'll cancel the two engagements and propose to Rozemyne.

And so, Hildebrand went to the Royal Academy with his heart full of resolve. It had been more or less a year since his last encounter with Rozemyne, so he was excited about seeing her again during the fellowship gathering. She came to greet him at the far end of the Small Hall, flanked by Wilfried and Charlotte.

What is that glittering thing?

Rozemyne's hair was as dark and mysterious as the night sky, exactly as he remembered it. One thing that he didn't remember, however, was the hair ornament decorated with five rainbow feystones that she was wearing. It was nestled beside an Ehrenfest hairpin of the more popular style and gleamed in the light as if marking its presence with each step that Rozemyne took. She had not been wearing it the year before, so it was unlikely to have been given to her by a guardian.

Did she receive it from Wilfried, then?

Hildebrand could feel a nasty burning sensation in his chest the moment that thought crossed his mind.

Fine, then. I'll just need to gift her feystones that are even better.

Once the usual greetings had been exchanged, Wilfried took Rozemyne by the hand as though it were the most natural thing in the world, then left. One day, Hildebrand vowed, he would be there in his place.

The Grutrissheit... and now rainbow feystones...

Hildebrand clenched his fist beneath the table, his lofty goal now in plain sight.

The Children of the Former Veronica Faction

Winter socializing began not even five days after Ferdinand had departed for Ahrensbach—and after spending about five days in the winter playroom before leaving for the Royal Academy, there was no time for me to mope around and act all sentimental.

In truth, I was keeping myself as busy as possible in an attempt to distract myself from the gaping hole in my heart and my constant urge to cry.

The higher-ups all wore particularly harsh expressions as the winter purge grew nearer and nearer. Some were still calling for guilt by association. I was the one who had asked for the innocent children to be saved, so I needed to do everything in my power to ensure that the lighter punishments worked. Otherwise, Sylvester would draw criticism in my place.

“Lord Wilfried, Lady Rozemyne,” Matthias said, stepping forward as soon as we arrived at the Royal Academy and stepped into the common room. “I have been restlessly awaiting this opportunity to speak without interference from parents or factions.”

Matthias was a mednoble apprentice knight of the former Veronica faction; he had distinctive purple hair, which was tied behind his head, and knelt before us with the trained movements of a knight. He looked pale and sickly, and his blue eyes were locked on Wilfried and me with the desperation of someone backed into a corner.

“There is something I must tell you about the Goddess of Chaos, who comes to bring unrest to Ehrenfest,” he continued.

It seemed that Matthias wanted to speak directly to the archducal family as an Ehrenfest noble. He first asked for our confirmation that he and the other children could still offer their names to escape their parents’ influence and the threat of guilt by association. I could tell that he was asking specifically for the sake of those in the former Veronica faction.

“Lady Georgine came to my estate on her way back to Ahrensbach,” Matthias finally said, then went on to detail a secret meeting with Georgine. He told us the names of all the nobles who had attended, including his father Giebe Gerlach, and what he knew about their plans.

Matthias's report meant we now had valuable testimony for taking down Giebe Gerlach. Wilfried and I wasted no time before writing to Sylvester, detailing everything we had been told. And the next day, Charlotte brought us his response when she came to the Royal Academy herself.

"Father asked that we all read his letter together," she said.

After eating, we archduke candidates gathered in a room with only our retainers, then read our correspondence from Sylvester. The new information we had obtained from the former Veronica children had resulted in the planned purge being accelerated and the implementation of some key adjustments.

"You may leave matters here to us. Your business is to oversee the children of the former Veronica faction in the dormitory and do your best to convince them—not participate in the purge. From Aub Ehrenfest."

"In that case, we should summon Matthias and Laurenz here to talk things over," Wilfried suggested.

Charlotte narrowed her eyes at him. "Brother, that is far too dangerous."

"No, Charlotte. They were both on the edge of their seats waiting for us to arrive, and they even renounced their families to do what is right for Ehrenfest. Their help is going to be essential if we are to take in the children of the former Veronica faction and save as many lives as possible."

"I agree with Wilfried," I said. "They could have chosen to remain silent, but they came forward and gave crucial testimony. I cannot imagine they intend to cause us any harm."

We promised Charlotte that we would surround ourselves with guard knights and not let Matthias and Laurenz get too close, then summoned them both to speak with us. We would discuss what we could do to make the children of the former Veronica faction more comfortable in the dormitory.

"First, we will get together to discuss who committed what crimes and how far the guilt by association is likely to reach. Everyone will then talk about what they should do when we are informed who is considered guilty, with the choice being whether they will either give their names or be punished alongside their family," Matthias began. "There may be some who do not need to give their names, depending on the severity of their family's crimes and the punishment they are due to receive, but our aim is to prevent a mass panic when the results of the purge are reported."

"Following our conversation, those who have decided to be punished alongside their families can be detained and sent back to Ehrenfest," Laurenz added, then shot Matthias a sideways glance: they

must have agreed on what they were going to say in advance of our meeting. "Allowing them to stay here would only put everyone else in danger."

I nodded at their explanation, which prompted Matthias to soften his expression a little in an attempt to put us more at ease. "To my knowledge, there are no students who know of my father's and Lady Georgine's plan," he said. "My father is an exceptionally cautious man; he would not tell me any details unless I gave my name."

"That said," Laurenz continued, "the fact that his plan remains largely unknown does not guarantee that those involved will not grow suicidally desperate. If someone were to attack an archduke candidate, then those of us associated with the former Veronica faction would all be punished without question. That is what we need to avoid more than anything."

Matthias and Laurenz had thus far served as the spiritual core of the children of the former Veronica faction, so they wanted to be responsible for convincing the others to cooperate—but Charlotte shook her head.

"The aub personally requested that we archduke candidates win them over," she said. "That is our duty." I could tell from her somewhat clouded expression that she either didn't feel that they trusted her or was just feeling on guard in general.

"Now, now, milady. You would be wise to let Matthias and Laurenz assist you." Rihyarda stepped forward, having been silently watching from behind me. "You may not mean for it, but you cannot allow your emotions to cloud your judgment. Keeping your distance until things calm down is best for everyone's safety."

Those of the former Veronica faction were going to lose their parents and other family members; there were some who might snap and do something dangerous, or who might have their tempers flare at the slightest misstep. Our goal was to save as many lives as we could by allowing the children to give their names and escape the punishment normally meted out in these situations. If some were still unhappy with that, then we ran the risk of everyone being deemed guilty by association nonetheless.

"Very few nobles are willing to stray from tradition," Rihyarda continued, "so we cannot permit ourselves to leave even a single opening."

Matthias and Laurenz nodded in firm agreement, and our guard knights all straightened their backs to reinforce their determination.

"Eat separately from the others until everything has been decided," Rihyarda told us archduke candidates. "If you wish to save them, then you must do more than strive to win them over."

The next day, once the first-years had all arrived, we gathered everyone in the dormitory together. We then said what the former Veronica faction had done and explained that there was going to be a purge over the winter.

“Aub Ehrenfest intends to save as many lives as he can,” I said, “and we hope to do the same.”

Wilfried nodded. “We have been told that we must secure your names to justify breaking from tradition, but the treatment you will receive in turn will recompense you for the great sacrifices you have made. Think well about how you intend to live your lives going forward.”

The children of the former Veronica faction listened quietly. Matthias and Laurenz were standing at the very front of their group so that they could intervene if anyone lost their temper and tried to throw themselves at us.

“I imagine that you have your own thoughts on this matter, and that you will at times feel angry at us for punishing those close to you,” I said. “However, acting out of anger may result in many unnecessary deaths.”

“What do you mean by that, Lady Rozemyne?” asked Matthias. All those of the former Veronica faction were suddenly staring at me.

“After the purge, the baptized children in the winter playroom will be sent to a section of the castle, while those too young to have been baptized will enter the care of my retainers in the orphanage.”

“Even the unbaptized children...?” came a voice. Several students were looking up at me in disbelief. They were presumably the ones with younger brothers and sisters at that age.

“Lady Rozemyne, will my little brother still be able to be baptized as a noble once he’s taken to the orphanage?” Laurenz asked, clearly surprised. The fact that he had an unbaptized younger brother was news to me.

I gave him a look, then cast my eyes downward. “Those in the orphanage will receive an education, and the most talented among them will earn our recognition. Those who do not wish for revenge and are willing to serve Aub Ehrenfest will subsequently be baptized with the High Bishop or the archduke as their guardian, then live in the castle dormitory. However, as this completely contradicts the traditions followed up to this point, there are sure to be many who challenge the idea of allowing the children of criminals to live as nobles.”

Apparently, the nobles who had suffered the most at the hands of Veronica and her faction were trying to use this opportunity to eliminate them entirely. Even so, I wanted to save as many children as I could.

“If we were to follow tradition, the pre-baptism children would have no avenue for survival,” I continued. “It is safe to say that whatever decisions you come to will determine their lives from here on out. As their elders, I must ask that you all pave the way forward for them.”

Although we were openly discussing the purge, the children of the former Veronica faction would not be able to send any letters to their families to warn them. They were racked with fear, anxiety, and despair, completely isolated from their loved ones back in Ehrenfest.

Matthias and Laurenz took the children to a meeting room so that they could discuss the situation in greater detail. After seeing them off, I called over Roderick, who was one of my retainers.

“Your tale may help to convince them, as you gave your name to the archducal family and successfully left the former Veronica faction,” I said. “Roderick, assist Matthias and Laurenz with their efforts, and inform me of the decision they come to.”

We archduke candidates had forbidden ourselves from contacting the children until they had made their decisions, so there was no way for us to find out what they were saying ourselves. By sending Roderick, however, we could acquire the information we needed without issue.

“If possible, ask about their family compositions as well. It may be easier to save them if we know how many pre-baptismal children there are.”

“Understood.”

As soon as Roderick left the common room, I turned to Theodore, who was standing patiently behind Judithe. “It is under these circumstances that I wish for you to serve as my guard knight. I imagine this will not be easy, considering that you have only just entered the Royal Academy, but I am confident that you will serve me well.”

Theodore, Judithe’s little brother, was serving me as a guard knight only while I was at the Royal Academy. He wished to serve Giebe Kirnberger after his own graduation. Our announcement of the purge had come almost immediately after he first arrived, and it made sense that someone so young would feel so tense.

“You will do just fine,” Leonore said, doing her best to console him. “Your duty here is to finish your classes as soon as possible so that you can accompany Lady Rozemyne when she goes to the library or Professor Hirschur’s laboratory, for example. Passing becomes more time-consuming the older one gets, so I am looking forward to seeing the speed at which you complete your first year. I am sure that Lady Rozemyne will once again pass all of her classes on the first day due to her time spent studying with Lord Ferdinand.”

This year, Leonore, Judithe, and Theodore were having to guard me all by themselves. They would no doubt struggle to manage everything among themselves, which was why Leonore had tasked Theodore with finishing as soon as possible.

Theodore glanced at Judithe, concerned. “My sister told me that I would barely need to carry out the usual duties of a guard knight and would instead endure brutal training day after day... so this is more responsibility than I expected.”

Judithe recoiled. “Theodore, you little...” she said under her breath.

Leonore looked up, deep in thought. “Perhaps she felt that way because, in previous years, Lady Rozemyne had already returned home by the time she finished her classes. In that regard, it is inevitable that she would have spent less time on guard duty.”

“Oh, I see. So my sister was always the slowest to finish her classes? That makes sense.”

“Leonore! Theodore! Please, stop already!” Judithe exclaimed, suddenly teary-eyed. “I’m going to work hard to be a proper guard knight for Lady Rozemyne this year, so please!”

Leonore giggled. “I would not say that Judithe is slow to finish her classes; rather, she takes her time and does her best to ensure that she attains the highest possible grades. Not to mention, there is nobody in the dormitory who can best her when it comes to ranged attacks. She is among our most capable students, and she was even praised by Lord Bonifatius himself.”

“What?! We’re still talking about my sister here, right?!” Theodore exclaimed, his eyes wide. He had spent the past couple years at home, so he must not have known the more intricate details about Judithe’s efforts and successes.

“Her excellence only went unrecognized for so long because she was surrounded by other students who excelled in their practical lessons, such as Angelica and Cornelius,” Leonore continued. “Judithe finished last year’s written lessons in no time at all, you know. Judithe, I expect you to work even harder this year to prove to Theodore how special you truly are.”

Leonore’s words seemed to light a fire under Judithe—she clearly wasn’t about to let her little brother overtake her. I understood her feelings well; I was similarly working hard to be a good big sister to Charlotte and Melchior.

We can’t let our little brothers beat us that easily, right? Good luck, Judithe.

“In any case, Theodore—address Judithe by her name rather than as your sister while on duty. We do not want any confusion when speaking to one another or giving orders. Also, as we are coworkers,

we refrain from using honorific titles with each other. You may call me 'Leonore' as well."

"Understood, Leonore."

Theodore muttered "Judithe" to himself over and over again, trying to get used to it, while Judithe similarly muttered that she found it strange hearing Theodore address her by name. It was adorable how similar they were as they both gazed around quizzically, and I couldn't help but giggle.

"I also struggled to get used to things when changing my job and status," I said.

"When was that, Lady Rozemyne?" Judithe asked, spinning around to face me. Her violet eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"Many things changed when I became the archduke's adopted daughter. I was troubled when I had to start calling Wilfried my brother despite having never met him before, and then there was when Lord Sylvester told me to stop addressing him with a title to emphasize our closeness. I imagine that you and Theodore will need some time to adjust, but it shouldn't take you too long if you just start viewing it as part of your work."

Though that's like ancient history to me now. Back when I was an apprentice shrine maiden, I even used to address Damuel as "Sir Damuel."

I gazed down at my feet, reflecting on the truths that nobody would believe, even if I told them.

"Lady Rozemyne, almost everyone has made their decision," Roderick announced upon his return.

We moved to a meeting room so that we could hear him out. As he had said, the majority of the children of the former Veronica faction had settled on whom to give their names to once they were considered guilty by association. Of the sixteen children, three intended to give their names to me specifically.

"Matthias, Laurenz, and Muriella have parents who are already sworn to Lady Georgine, so their minds are made up. Matthias and Laurenz said that they will make their name-swearing stones sooner rather than later, such that it becomes easier for the other children to follow their example."

I scanned the list of whom the children wished to give their names to and noticed some very clear trends.

"Of the apprentice knights and apprentice attendants, it appears that most of the boys wish to give their names to Wilfried, and most of the girls to Charlotte. Meanwhile, the apprentice scholars wish to give theirs to the aub."

"I see that Matthias, Laurenz, and Muriella are the only ones who wish to serve me," I said. Matthias and Laurenz were apprentice

knights, while Muriella was a female apprentice scholar. “I would have liked to replenish my number of female apprentice attendants...”

Lieseleta was due to graduate this year and Brunhilde the next. Bertilde would already be attending by then, which would aid me somewhat, but I would still need one or two more apprentice attendants. Unfortunately, it seemed that I wasn’t very popular.

“The girls who are losing their parents will doubtless struggle to wed within Ehrenfest,” Roderick explained. “That is why they wish to be with Lady Charlotte, who has a high likelihood of marrying into another duchy.”

These girls knew that they would most likely be permitted to follow Charlotte when that time came—or, rather, we didn’t want name-sworn retainers being left behind in Ehrenfest to begin with. Charlotte would provide them with support in whatever duchy they moved to, and they were bound to secure better partners there than in Ehrenfest, where their families were deemed criminals. Thus, it was inevitable that more female apprentice knights and attendants would want to serve Charlotte.

“I would think, then, that the apprentice scholars—who would not be allowed into other duchies for fear of espionage—would seek to serve me instead. So why are they all asking to serve Wilfried or the archducal family...?” I asked, confused.

“Because being your retainer will mean going to the temple, which is still viewed quite lowly among noble society. Plus, Hartmut is famous for being strict, so...”

“Hartmut? Strict?” Philine asked, tilting her head. “Compared to Lord Ferdinand, he is kindness incarnate. He always explains himself very politely.”

Roderick gave a half-smile. “He may be kinder than Lord Ferdinand, but he is just as willing to distance those whom he feels are of no use to him. Hartmut is very high in status among scholars, and they would fear earning his ire when they have lost their families and given their names.”

Serving me would inevitably mean going to the temple, and any scholar in my service would need to be able to work with Hartmut, who was so heavily involved in the printing industry.

“In short—while many do want to give their name to you, Lady Rozemyne, there are too many reasons for them to hesitate,” Roderick said. His lips then curled into a troubled smile. “You are also of a weak constitution on top of all this.”

I was still weak enough that I could die at any moment, so many were afraid of giving their names to me and meeting an early demise as a result. After all, if your lord or lady died before they could return your name, then you would die with them.

“Not to mention, you do not participate in socializing due to the Dedication Ritual, and you tend to collapse partway through events, so even apprentice attendants fi—”

“Waschen.”

In the blink of an eye, Roderick’s head was engulfed in water. Lieseleta was wielding her schtappe for some reason, and we could only blink in confusion as she gave us all a bright smile.

“I noticed some filth around his mouth, so I took the liberty of using waschen.”

“I noticed that as well,” Brunhilde said with a smile and a nod. “But I feel that some still remains. Roderick, you should go and give your face a thorough wash. Here, allow me to accompany you.”

Her amber eyes narrowed all the while, Brunhilde secured Roderick and guided him out of the room. It was all so sudden that nobody could stop them, and before we knew it, Roderick had been forcibly removed midway through his report.

I gazed up at Lieseleta, confused. “E-Erm... Lieseleta...”

“Please wait a moment, Lady Rozemyne. I shall pour you some fresh tea,” Lieseleta said with a smile, then smoothly stepped out of the room. As I looked around, I noticed Philine and Judithe both sigh.

“Um, do you two know what just happened...?” I asked.

There was a brief pause as they exchanged glances, then Leonore stepped forward. “Nothing happened at all. Lieseleta and Brunhilde were correct: Roderick’s mouth needed to be washed. That is all.”

It didn’t look that way to me, but... I clearly shouldn’t pry into this any further.

I decided not to ask any more questions, and soon enough, Roderick came back with Brunhilde. He looked somewhat depressed—and no cleaner than before.

“That should do it. Now, Roderick—you may continue your report,” Brunhilde said, putting a hand on his back and urging him in front of me. He took a moment to gather himself, then stood up straight and smiled.

“My sincerest apologies. Allow me to continue my report. You treat me as fairly as you do all your other retainers, Lady Rozemyne. If those of the former Veronica faction see you treating Matthias and Laurenz with just as much consideration, then they might feel more inclined to give their names to you. And as the two of them do not expect the other archduke candidates to change their tune, they intend to take the initiative and give their names first.”

They wanted to demonstrate the fairness with which I treated my retainers to show the other children that nobody would be abused after giving their name.

“Muriella looks up to Lady Elvira. Her faction and familial

concerns mean she has not yet been able to say so, but giving her name to you will change that. She will no longer be punished for expressing her tastes, and she will get to read Lady Elvira's books sooner than most, which will motivate her immensely."

That description alone allowed me to put a face to Muriella's name. She was the pink-haired girl who seemed more excited than anyone about new books being added to the dormitory's library corner—who would wait eagerly by the shelves for a new book by Elvira, then read it so quickly that her green eyes became a blur. I seemed to recall her mentioning that her parents, as members of the former Veronica faction, refused to buy books written by Leisegang nobles.

"Muriella wanted to give her name to Lady Elvira, but as she is limited to members of the archducal family, she chose you as the closest alternative."

"I will ask if Mother can receive her name instead," I said. Name-swearing was tremendously important, so I wanted to grant the desires of those who were cooperating as much as I could.

I sent my question to Sylvester, who then returned a proposal: I could accept Muriella's name, but return it after graduating so that she could then swear herself to Elvira. Securing more scholars for the printing industry was urgent business, so his intention was for me to teach Muriella the basics as my retainer and then have her serve as Elvira's subordinate.

"Furthermore, Lady Rozemyne—we wish to speak with you about Gretia."

"Did something happen?"

"As a fourth-year apprentice attendant, she wants to give her name to you for protection and other reasons but is struggling over the choice."

Gretia was a shy and rather quiet girl, which had apparently made her the subject of much teasing from the boys. She wanted a guardian in the Royal Academy more than anything—and after seeing that Roderick was faring well, she had decided to give her name to me too.

"She notices even the most minute details and is exceptionally skilled at keeping her lady's room and day-to-day affairs in order. Unfortunately, her personality means she is not very good at leading interactions with others, and she is not confident that she will manage as your retainer due to how often you are involved with top-ranking duchies and the royal family."

"I suppose she has a point..." I said, then turned to Lieseleta and Brunhilde.

Brunhilde placed a contemplative hand on her cheek. "We must keep in mind that Lieseleta is due to graduate this year. Gretia received excellent scores as an apprentice attendant, so, when Bertilde

starts attending the Academy next year, perhaps we can have them complement each other with internal and external affairs.”

As archnobles, Brunhilde and her younger sister, Bertilde, were both expected to form connections with top-ranking duchies and do business with the Sovereignty. Elvira was still in the midst of tutoring Bertilde and was no doubt focusing on these very crucial skills as we spoke. It seemed that I needed an attendant who, like Lieseleta, was good at handling internal matters.

“I am a mednoble myself, so I currently entrust negotiations with top-ranking duchies and the Sovereignty to Brunhilde,” Lieseleta said. “Gretia says that she is lacking in confidence, but I am sure that she will manage. Based on what I have seen, she is more than capable of dealing with laynobles and mednobles.”

“Indeed,” Brunhilde added. “Judging by her performance at tea parties and the Interduchy Tournament, she will do better than fine. I am also going to be here until the end of next year, so Gretia does not need to worry. She may count on me.” There was a certain strength in her amber eyes.

There was no avoiding the fact that I needed attendants. I elected to have Gretia focus on internal matters as my retainer and asked Roderick to pass this news on to her.

The advancement ceremony and the fellowship gatherings would start tomorrow, and none of us knew when the purge would start or finish. My retainers distributed rinsham and hairpins to the other students, as they had done the year before, and we all started on our preparations. We couldn’t allow the other duchies to find out that our dormitory was in something of a crisis.

The Fellowship Gatherings (Third Year)

“The ceremonies are tomorrow, archduke candidates—and just like last year, I was not informed that all of our students have arrived.”

Hirschur had stormed into the dormitory while we archduke candidates were eating with our retainers—and upon seeing her, Wilfried and Ignaz had exchanged glances that seemed to say, “Crap! We forgot again!” In truth, it had slipped my mind as well; dealing with the children of the former Veronica faction had naturally taken priority.

“My sincerest apologies,” Wilfried replied, rising to his feet at once. “We have our own circumstances, however, and—”

He fell silent, unsure how to proceed without mentioning the purge. Hirschur was looking at him with raised eyebrows, clearly suspicious, so I quickly stood up as well.

“We sincerely apologize for having once again failed to communicate with you. Would you care to eat with us? There is much I want to know about the year ahead, and we have some news that may interest you.”

Hirschur scanned the plates on the table, then smiled. It seemed that the delicious meals on display had worked to assuage her frustration.

“Rihyarda, please prepare a seat for Professor Hirschur.”

“Understood, milady.”

As she waited for her meal to be prepared, Hirschur told us about Ehrenfest’s ranking this year and what to expect in the upcoming ceremonies. One of Wilfried’s retainers passed this information on to the students in the common room.

“Professor Hirschur, has Raimund or Ferdinand contacted you?” I asked.

“Ferdinand sent me one letter, which I received at the end of autumn. In it, he informed me that he would soon be leaving for Ahrensbach, and asked me to look after you. Raimund has not yet come to my laboratory, so I have not heard from him.”

Royal Academy professors were kept up to date on the results of the Archduke Conference, so she had already known that Ferdinand was engaged to Detlinde—but she had not expected that he would get

so little time to prepare for his departure. Finding out about this in his letter had come as quite a surprise to her.

“It is ironic that Ferdinand, whom Lady Veronica despised so much, would end up being the one to realize her dream of connecting with Ahrensbach,” Hirschur said with a sigh.

A smile played on my lips. Outside of those particularly close to Ferdinand, most nobles seemed to be celebrating the marriage with Ahrensbach. I was glad to know that Hirschur wouldn’t have been fooled by the fake enthusiasm that Ferdinand had shown—that she would have immediately seen that he didn’t actually want to go.

“Professor Hirschur, Ferdinand gifted me his estate and said that I may turn it into a library. There are many magic tools that I want to make in preparation, and to that end, I intend to join Raimund in your laboratory this year.”

“Oh yes, Lord Ferdinand was your guardian, wasn’t he? Hm... Did he give you his research documents, then? Or did he take those with him?”

Hirschur was obviously more interested in the research documents than anything else, so I thought back to what Ferdinand had taken with him to Ahrensbach. As I recalled, he had been so pressed for time that he had packed only the essentials. He had also said that there was little need for him to bring his more important items right away, since he didn’t expect that he’d have a chance to use them.

“I imagine they are still somewhere in Ehrenfest,” I said.

“Ferdinand is staying in a guest room in Ahrensbach at the moment, no? The plan is to send the rest of his belongings over when he is given proper chambers after his Starbind Ceremony.”

“You did not bring any of those documents with you, I presume?”

“The thought didn’t occur to me...”

Only then did I realize that I hadn’t prepared the documents necessary to bend Hirschur to my will. Last year it had been as simple as packing the documents that Ferdinand picked out for me, but now that he was gone, I would need to do all that myself.

He really was thorough, wasn’t he?

I wasn’t anywhere near as capable; I hadn’t even thought to inform Hirschur that the students had all arrived at the dormitory. What would I do if I needed to ask for her help this term?

“Still, why are you archduke candidates eating separately from the other students?” Hirschur asked, looking around the dining hall.

Wilfried and Charlotte were struggling to find an answer. We couldn’t risk leaking information about the purge when we didn’t know what the situation was in Ehrenfest. The risk of sensitive information getting out was too great.

“We determined that it would be best for us to keep our distance

this year," I explained. "That said, I am sure we will start eating together again before long."

"What's going on in Ehrenfest...?"

"We shall tell you when it has been resolved," I said with a smile.

Hirschur eyed me intently for a moment, then seemed to grasp that I had no intention of answering any further questions. "I see. In that case, I look forward to you visiting my laboratory once everything is over. I imagine you will not have an easy time until then, but do take care of yourself, Lady Rozemyne."

"Hm?"

Thanks to my second jureve, I was feeling stronger by the day. I was no longer sickly enough to warrant anyone telling me to get some rest or what have you.

Hirschur noticed my confusion and made a face, clearly exasperated. "The air here in the dormitory has grown heavy once again; the feelings of unity and cooperation that developed over the past few years are gone. Perhaps that is because even the Saint of Ehrenfest is wearing such a troubled frown."

I pressed my hands against my cheeks. I wasn't frowning or looking the slightest bit forlorn. No, I was smiling—I was sure that I was. But as I tilted my head, Hirschur placed her hands over mine and pressed against my face. I could feel the warmth seeping from her skin into mine.

"You are free to push yourself beyond your means," she said in a quiet voice, "but do not lose sight of who you are in the process."

Hirschur then got up and exited the dormitory as quickly as she had come. I was at a loss for words. My head was full of questions that I didn't know the answers to.

What did she mean, lose sight of who I am...?

The day of the advancement ceremony and fellowship gatherings had arrived. I got dressed, put on my cape and brooch, and then slid my rainbow hair stick beneath my hairpin just as third bell grew near. It was time for us to leave for the auditorium.

I got into my highbeast and went down to the second floor, where I met up with my male retainers, Roderick and Theodore. Brunhilde waited until my other retainers had gathered as well and then turned to me.

"Lady Rozemyne, we have decided that Leonore, Judithe, and Theodore will serve as your guards, I as your attendant, and Roderick as your scholar. Will this do?"

"Indeed, Brunhilde. That will do just fine."

Considering everyone's status, that was about the only selection they could have made anyway. It really made me feel my lack of

archnoble retainers.

We continued down to the first floor to find Charlotte speaking with the first-years. “You will not be able to return to the dormitory without your cape and brooch,” she said, “so make sure you do not forget them. Now, is everyone here? Oh, are we still missing those of the former Veronica faction? Marianne, Rudolf, can you check on them for me?”

Marianne and Rudolf passed me as I arrived at the bottom of the stairs, set on carrying out their order.

The gathered children were all dressed in mostly black clothes with capes and brooches, and the girls were wearing hairpins as well. The first-year girls were wearing the hairpins we had given them, but many of the older students now had ornaments they had bought themselves, so not everyone was matching like last year.

I wasn’t wearing my hairpin from last year either. I couldn’t wear three hair ornaments at once, so I had prioritized the two that mattered most: the rainbow feystone charm that Ferdinand had given me and a fancy hairpin from Tuuli.

I put away my highbeast—I was only permitted to use it within the dormitory—and then made my way over to Wilfried.

“Hm? Is something up, Rozemyne?”

I tilted my head to one side and ran my fingers along the rainbow feystones dangling from my hair stick. “Ferdinand gave me this charm, but I think we should act as though you gave it to me. Make sure you play along when we are in public.”

“Why?”

“Otherwise people will say that his present to me is better than the proposal feystone he gave to Lady Detlinde, and rumors will spread. Brunhilde told me as much.”

In my eyes, one ornament with rainbow feystones was no different from another. Plus, Ferdinand hadn’t mentioned any potential issues when telling me to wear the charm, so I had assumed that everything would be fine. Not everyone seemed to agree, however, and after quite the lecture from Brunhilde and Liesele, I was starting to see why. It was like giving a diamond ring to one’s partner, then giving another girl a necklace with five bigger diamonds of a higher quality. The jewelry was worn in different places, sure, but that didn’t make it any more acceptable.

“Lady Detlinde would not be pleased to learn that Ferdinand gave me this hair stick. You understand that, yes?”

“I guess? I’m not a girl, so I can’t say I really follow.”

“It’s really very simple!” one of Wilfried’s attendants suddenly exclaimed, his head in his hands. “Please try a little harder!”

There was no denying that Wilfried and I were pretty romantically

oblivious as far as couples went. It was difficult to say whether that was a good or bad thing.

“The easiest solution would be for me to go without the hair stick on occasions when Lady Detlinde might see it,” I said, “but given the state of the dormitory and the suspicions of other duchies, I cannot take that risk.”

“Right. Uncle gave you that charm specifically because he expects you to be in enough danger to need it. And you were actually attacked by an Immerdink archnoble back then.”

Said archnoble had actually been aiming for Hartmut, but that didn’t change the fact that I had ended up being hit. And then there had been the terrorist attack so soon after. Nobody could guess what would happen moving forward. The more charms I had, the better.

“Our cover story is going to be that my guardians—Father, Ferdinand, the archducal couple, and you—each gathered one stone, which Ferdinand then designed into this charm,” I explained. Brunhilde had said that this would also serve to protect Ferdinand’s honor when Lady Detlinde’s hairpins made everyone question his taste in fashion. “I just do not want Ferdinand to be looked down on or Lady Detlinde to become outraged. Keep in mind that how Ferdinand is treated in Ahrensbach will change drastically if people think he is treating me better than his fiancée.”

“Uncle always worries about the people around him, but never about himself...” Wilfried said with a sigh. He then pulled up his sleeve to reveal two charms hanging from his wrist. One blocked physical attacks and the other mana attacks. Ferdinand had apparently given charms to Charlotte, Sylvester, and Florencia as well. “Alright. I’ll say that we all prepared the feystones together, then Uncle designed the ornament.”

All of a sudden, there came a tremendous *crash* from somewhere above us. Several thumping noises then followed, like somebody was flailing around.

“Leonore!”

“Natalie!”

“Alexis!”

The guard knights whose names were called all rushed upstairs at once, while the others formed a defensive line. The commotion stopped a moment later, and it wasn’t long before Laurenz appeared with a first-year boy wrapped in bands of light.

“Laurenz, what was all that noise?” I asked.

“As we expected, one of the students was going to use the fellowship gatherings to warn his family about the purge. He intended to ask someone from another duchy to deliver this correspondence for him.” Laurenz then held out a sheet of paper, on which was written a

message seeped in despair.

“Everyone who has given their name to Lady Georgine or committed crimes is going to be detained and punished. You haven’t done anything wrong though, right, Mother? Father? We’ll meet again, won’t we?”

This student had so much love for his family—I could feel it in every word he had written, and the thought alone made my heart ache so much that I wanted to cry. Part of me wanted to ease his worries and send him home to his parents, but I was on the side of those doing the purging. There was nothing I could say or do, so I simply gritted my teeth.

“Laurenz, what do you intend to do with this boy?” I asked.

He gave a thin smile. “We have decided that no students from the former Veronica faction will attend the advancement ceremony and fellowship gatherings. Matthias has asked that you inform Professor Hirschur that an infectious sickness has swept through the dormitory, and that we will need several days to recover.”

“Laurenz, that is—”

I had intended to say “not what I asked,” but Wilfried grabbed me by the arm and pulled me away before the words could pass my lips. “We agreed to leave the convincing to them, Rozemyne,” he said. “We can’t let Father and everyone else know that one of the students tried to leak information to the suspects and to other duchies, especially when we just gave them an opportunity to escape punishment. If you care about them, walk away.”

“Wilfried...”

“We predicted that at least one person would try something like this, didn’t we? And you know what we said we would do in that case,” he continued, looking between the tied-up child and me. We had two choices: punish everyone by association, as per tradition, or pretend that we hadn’t seen anything. “Your compassion spared me before when I committed a crime out of love for my family. I’m going to offer this student the same opportunity that you gave me—but only this once.”

“I wish to save as many of the children as possible, so I will also look the other way. Laurenz, those of the former Veronica faction are in your hands.”

“We’re off, then. Take care to watch your expressions and posture, everyone. We can’t let those of the other duchies know what’s happening.”

Wilfried ordered for the main door to be opened, then we all started filing out into the hallway. We were much smaller in number now that the children of the former Veronica faction were staying behind. It wasn’t even third bell, yet I was already exhausted.

“Are you well, Sister?” Charlotte asked.

“I understand the intense love for one’s family all too well, so it pains me to think what that boy is going through.”

“His suffering may be hard to bear, but the alternative would see him forfeit his life entirely.” Charlotte reached out to me, and we exited the dormitory hand in hand. I could feel the warmth of her touch, and she gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

The number above our dormitory’s door was now an eight, and we were closer to the auditorium than before. Our rise through the ranks also meant that our seats for the ceremony were nearer to the front.

I could hear muttering as we took our places in the auditorium, but I was too preoccupied with the boy in the dormitory and what would happen if we failed to win over those of the former Veronica faction to pay it any mind. I merely did my best to keep a noble smile plastered on my face while some higher-up gave basically the same speech as last year.

I was still dazed even when the advancement ceremony came to an end, and everyone started dividing themselves into laynoble, mednoble, and archnoble groups for the fellowship gatherings. We archduke candidates left the auditorium and made our way to the Small Hall with our retainers.

“Lord Wilfried, Lady Rozemyne, and Lady Charlotte from Ehrenfest the Eighth have arrived,” came an announcement as we entered.

I noticed that Hildebrand was seated at the far end of the room. Evidently, he was once again having to oversee the Royal Academy as a member of the royal family. I smiled at him, and he smiled back. I had been told not to interact with royalty, but surely that much was okay.

Once everyone was gathered, it was time for the usual greetings. The students of each duchy would first speak with Hildebrand at the front, then slowly work their way through all the duchies ranked above their own. Those of a lower rank would come to them.

Klassenberg, then Dunkelfelger, then Drewanchel... The first seven duchies offered their greetings, and then it was our turn.

“Once again, Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has woven our threads together and blessed us with a meeting.”

Wilfried spoke to Hildebrand as our representative. I was standing between him and Charlotte, and I could tell that they were both particularly tense—maybe because they had been told to avoid getting involved with the royal family.

Hildebrand, in contrast, seemed to be excited beyond words. His purple eyes were wrinkled in a smile that made me surprisingly envious.

If only I could be so happy.

I wasn't sure why I was feeling this way. Seeing someone else smile hadn't affected me like this last year.

"Rozemyne, I look forward to us spending more time together in the library this year," Hildebrand intoned.

"I am honored."

Naturally, I couldn't say that I was going to be keeping my distance from him to avoid being scolded again or that I planned to hole up in Hirschur's lab instead. That was why I had settled for an innocuous reply delivered with a smile.

After greeting the prince, Wilfried, Charlotte, and I made our way to the next table. Now we needed to speak with Klassenberg. It appeared that the duchy didn't have any archduke candidates this year, so Wilfried exchanged greetings with an archnoble representative whom I didn't recognize. The archnoble apologized for the trouble their merchant had caused, then said, "I hope that our relationship may continue to be long and fruitful."

Unfortunately for him, no matter what he says, we don't have the space to do more business with Klassenberg.

There was no helping the fact that the lower city was completely packed. Really, we expected that Ahrensbach would try to use the marriage between our two duchies to secure business slots.

That said, this purge is going to give Ehrenfest much less mana to work with, so we won't be able to help Groschel to use entwickeln and become a trading city. I wonder what we'll do about that...

"Lord Lestilaut, Lady Hannelore. Once again, Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has woven our threads together and blessed us with a meeting."

Wilfried repeated the usual greeting when we arrived at Dunkelfelger's table. Hannelore was there, and the smile she gave when she saw me worked to improve my mood a little.

"I am glad to see that you are well, Lady Hannelore," I said.

"And I you, Lady Rozemyne. I just heard from Professor Rauffen that an illness has kept so many Ehrenfest students from attending today." She had clearly expected me to be among them.

Charlotte smoothly stepped forward with a smile. "This occurred after my sister was bedridden. There is no need to worry about her health. That aside, when shall we deliver your hairpin? Rozemyne will not need to return to Ehrenfest for the Dedication Ritual this year, so we could even give it to you during socializing season."

I applauded Charlotte on the inside, impressed that she had changed the topic so masterfully, then turned my attention to Lestilaut, who had ordered the hairpin in the first place. "The design is based on flowers native to your duchy, correct? The hairpin

craftsperson was taken aback by the fine artistic sense of the designer. The final design was wonderfully put together.”

“Heh. It certainly was. I see that even a backwater duchy such as Ehrenfest has some vestiges of taste,” Lestilaut said, his lips curving into a grin as though he thought my praise had been for him.

No way...

I decided to ask who had come up with the design.

“My brother,” Hannelore said. “He is a natural-born artist, having been skilled at matters like this since he was young.”

“That is quite a surprise.” I never would have imagined that the shouty guy who had led a platoon of duchies to steal Schwartz and Weiss from me had the spirit of an artist.

“That rainbow feystone ornament of yours is not bad either,” Lestilaut said. “From whence did it come?”

“My guardians worked to gather the stones, Lord Ferdinand designed it, then Wilfried gave it to me. Lord Ferdinand is very talented, is he not?”

“Turn around. I wish to examine it more closely.”

I was about to oblige Lestilaut, but Hannelore hastily tugged on his cape. “Brother! No matter how wondrous the hair ornament may be, it is rude to have Lady Rozemyne put herself on display like that.”

I stopped in my tracks, having already begun to turn around, then slowly eased back into my original position. *Whew. That was close. I almost did something unladylike.*

“My sincerest apologies, Lady Rozemyne,” Hannelore continued. “In any case, once socializing season arrives, you may deliver the hairpin to us and we can exchange books. You have more new books this year, yes? I am looking forward to reading them ever so much.”

“Indeed. Have you finished the book on our duchy’s history?” Lestilaut asked me. It was one thing to discuss such matters with a fellow bookworm like Hannelore, but I hadn’t expected that he would express an interest as well. There was a distinct sparkle in his red eyes.

Pleased about this unexpected development, I gave a firm nod. “Dunkelfelger has so much history that it was impossible to cover it all in a single Ehrenfest book. Instead, we intend to publish it across several volumes. The first is ready to be delivered during this year’s book exchange—and if everything is satisfactory, then it should be available to purchase following the next Archduke Conference.”

“I see. I shall look forward to our tea party, then.”

Wait... what? Lestilaut intends to join the tea party too?

I was so used to him looking down on Ehrenfest that I couldn’t even imagine him agreeing to sit with us. Had something happened to cause this change in him? As we moved on to greet Drewanchel, I

couldn't shake the feeling that I had been transported into a bizarre new world.

Once again, I decided to leave the speaking to Wilfried, since he was good friends with Ortwin. "Many of our students are having to miss classes due to illness," he said, "so I don't think we'll pass all of our classes on the first day this year."

"I see. That is unfortunate indeed. Our competition won't be affected though, I trust?"

"Of course not."

They renewed their promise as rivals, then the conversation turned to my hair stick. I gave the same explanation that I had given to Dunkelfelger.

We greeted Gilessenmeyer and Hauchletzte next, then it was time for us to see Ahrensbach.

"Lady Detlinde," Wilfried said. "Once again, Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has woven our threads together and blessed us with a meeting."

Detlinde appeared to be in an exceptionally good mood. "Lord Ferdinand is always wearing the kindest smile," she remarked. "He is also dedicating himself to his administrative work so that I can be here at the Royal Academy."

Yeeep... That's a fake smile.

It all sounded harmless enough, but Detlinde's report made me worried all of a sudden. I got the feeling that Ferdinand was neglecting food and sleep, instead relying on potions to get him through his work. I decided that I would write to him via Raimund when classes started.

"During the Feast of Beginnings, Lord Ferdinand played the harspiel for all the gathered nobles," Detlinde continued. "It was a new song—one overflowing with love and passion that he made just for me. I plan to have it played during tea parties this year."

I'm glad to hear that he went with my suggestion, but... a love song? Ferdinand, making a love song?

I certainly hadn't expected him to do something so cliché. Perhaps there had been no need for me to teach him a method for making allies.

Wilfried came back to his senses—hearing Detlinde go on and on about Ferdinand being so kind and wonderful had put him in a stupor—then discreetly poked my shoulder. "Rozemyne, is she actually talking about Uncle...?"

"It sounds like someone else entirely, but it must be him. I imagine he's really pushing himself."

Detlinde went on to declare that she was holding another tea party for cousins this year—and that I was actually invited this time.

The plan was for us to use that opportunity to deliver her hairpins and listen to Ferdinand's new song. I was looking forward to hearing what he had come up with.

We greeted the seventh-ranked duchy and then returned to our seats in time for the other duchies to start greeting us. The archduke candidate for Immerdink made a point of apologizing for the actions of the archnoble during last year's Interduchy Tournament. In truth, I wasn't really bothered about the attack; it had given us an additional reason to refuse the Sovereignty's requests and for me to wear my rainbow charm. Immerdink had no doubt suffered a great deal more than we had—though I hoped that this hadn't been the reason they had gone down in the rankings.

I accepted the apology with a smile, hoping not to earn any more ire from Immerdink in the future.

Passing Classes

The fellowship gathering concluded, and we started making our way back to the dormitory. My thoughts were dominated by the children of the former Veronica faction. I wanted to let them see their families, but that was out of the question. The purge had to happen. At most, I could only try to minimize the damage. But how?

“Lady Rozemyne!”

“Oh, Raimund.”

He had suddenly appeared from around a corner, having no doubt come from Hirschur’s laboratory in the specialty building. His light-violet cape fluttered behind him as he made his way over, but he was stopped in his tracks when my apprentice guard knights assumed defensive positions. It was to be expected, considering that he was an Ahrensbach noble.

Raimund took a step back, his eyes wide, then spoke to me from a distance. “Lady Rozemyne, I have a message from Lord Ferdinand. Would you like to hear it?”

“Did something happen?!”

“Er, not quite. I went to show him this”—he pulled out what appeared to be a slightly smaller version of a recording magic tool—“and he recorded a message on it.” Ferdinand had apparently turned it away, maintaining that it could be made even smaller—but not before leaving a few words for me.

“Play it. Play it now,” I said, leaning forward. “I want to hear it.”

Raimund nodded and touched the feystone.

“Rozemyne, it is I,” came an unmistakable voice from the magic tool. I was hit with a wave of nostalgia, even though it really hadn’t been that long since his departure for Ahrensbach. But as the message continued, such pleasant feelings quickly dissipated. “I hope you have not been neglecting your studies now that I am gone.”

Crap! I really have been!

“Remember your vow to come first-in-class once again,” the message continued. “Allow your or the duchy’s grades to slip and I will show no mercy.”

I clapped my hands on my cheeks in shock, looking entirely like *The Scream*—but it was then that the voice coming from the magic tool softened.

“Remember, however, that your task is not to secure *better* grades

than last year. I am simply saying that you should not let them fall. That should not be difficult, no?"

"The same as last year... Right." I clenched my fists. "Somehow, that makes it feel so much more doable."

"I do not believe it possible for you to raise your grades any higher..." Charlotte muttered from behind me.

"Shh! Don't tell her, Charlotte. She's finally motivated."

Ah! Hold on! It really is impossible for me to do any better! He tricked me, didn't he?!

I glared at the magic tool as it continued to speak.

"Wilfried, Charlotte—the same goes for the two of you. I anticipate that you shall attain results befitting the charms that I gave you. Come the Interduchy Tournament, I expect to hear that Ehrenfest's students once again passed all of their classes on the first day. Anything less will *not be tolerated*."

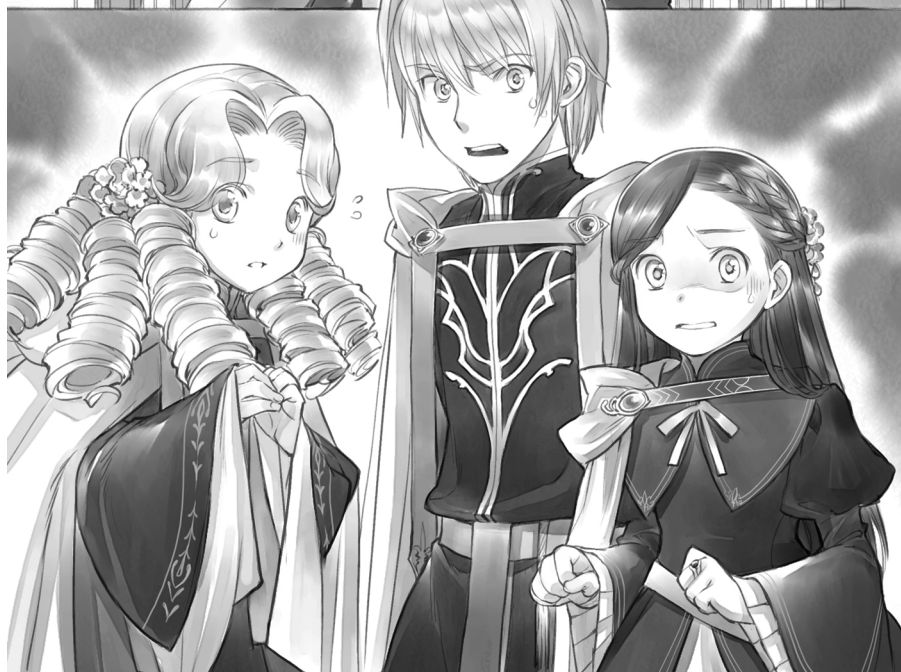
"Ngh!"

"No way..."

This demand was especially hard on Charlotte, who hadn't managed it last year, and she began to tremble beneath the immense pressure. I reached out to console her, only for Ferdinand to suddenly call out to me.

"Ah, yes. Rozemyne."

I froze. His voice sounded... kind. Uncomfortably so. It was the same, warm tone that he often adopted right before making an unreasonable demand. I turned my eyes from Charlotte to the magic tool still in Raimund's hand.



“If your grades go down at all, then I intend to consult Aub Ehrenfest about taking back the library I gave you. One who cannot manage herself can hardly be expected to manage so many books.”

“Nooooooo!” I cried, snatching the magic tool from Raimund. “Anything but that!”

Naturally, I was unable to negotiate with a recording. Not having someone around to set me regular tasks, combined with the mental anguish of the purge and stuff, meant that I had been neglecting my studies. I wasn’t even reading books. Still, thinking about my library was the only thing keeping my head above water—without it, I would sink into the depths of misery and die. I wasn’t exaggerating either. I would genuinely die.

“Well, um... that is the end of the message,” Raimund said, retrieving the tool. “Not even my best attempts to improve this magic tool have been enough for Lord Ferdinand, so I understand what you must be going through. Let us, uh... all work our very hardest.” His eyes flitted between me and the recorder in his hand, then he beat a hasty retreat.

“Wh-Wh... What are we going to do, Rozemyne?” Wilfried asked. “Now that I think about it, I haven’t studied at all since coming to the Royal Academy.”

“Nor have I, Sister,” Charlotte added.

Sylvester had explicitly told us to leave matters of the purge to him, but we were all so focused on it that we had forgotten about the Better Grades Committee entirely. This was bad. Ferdinand would no doubt give us the most scathing lecture the moment we reunited at the Interduchy Tournament.

At this rate, he’s going to have Sylvester take away my library!

“We can’t waste any more time worrying. We must do all that we can to protect my library!” I declared, balling my hand into a resolved fist.

“W-Wait, Rozemyne,” Wilfried said, his face pale. “I’m getting a really bad feeling about this.”

“Fear not, Wilfried. I will obliterate that bad feeling along with everything else that tries to get in my way.”

“No! That doesn’t help! We’re going to experience that nightmare all over again!”

I gave Wilfried a reassuring smile and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Unlike before, we’ve got an entire year of studying under our belts already. At most, we’ll only need to go over what we’ve already learned.”

“Hm... You have a point. We might be fighting with a library at stake again, but the similarities end there.” He clapped his hands

together, nodded to himself, and then added that this was also an order from Uncle, who knew how to “administer the medicine” without making it a “deadly poison.” I wasn’t sure what he was referring to, but I decided that now wasn’t the time to ask.

“First of all, we need to ensure that everyone passes on the first day,” I said. “That alone should not be any trouble.”

“Indeed,” Lieseleta said, smiling brightly and providing her support. “The students have all spent an entire year studying their hardest. If everyone works together, we should not experience any issues.”

From there, Brunhilde explained why Ferdinand was being so unreasonable. “If our duchy were to fall in rank, then everyone would mock us and say that our rise was only temporary after all. Lord Ferdinand will already be struggling in Ahrensbach, having moved from a middle to a greater duchy. If word spreads that his home duchy’s rank has fallen before his Starbind Ceremony, then he will receive much hostility as Lady Letizia’s mentor.”

Hearing that made me even more resolved—we would not allow our grades to drop this year, no matter what. “Maintaining our current position is important for a variety of reasons,” I said. “Let it be done, then. There is still enough time.”

“Right! Then let’s hurry back and get to studying!” Wilfried exclaimed.

We archduke candidates briskly made our way back to the dormitory with our retainers in tow. Upon our arrival, Wilfried threw open the door marked with an eight and rushed into the common room.

“We have to pass tomorrow’s exams on our first go!” he declared. “Everyone, fetch your study materials and gather back here!”

I got into my highbeast. “Leonore, Roderick, instruct the children of the former Veronica faction to bring their study materials and gather in the common room as well.”

Leonore hesitated for a moment, then nodded and said, “Understood.” Her expression was noticeably harder than before.

I went upstairs in Lessy, then rushed into my room as Judithe and Philine opened the door for me. “Rihyarda, we are going to be studying in the common room,” I said. “Prepare everything we will need.”

“At once, milady. Though I must say... this is quite sudden, is it not?”

“Ferdinand is extorting me,” I said, explaining everything that had happened with Raimund and the voice-recording magic tool. “He’ll take away my library if our duchy’s grade average goes down at all. Don’t you think that’s cruel, threatening to take something away so

soon after he gave it to me?"

"Lord Ferdinand is attempting to guide you even now, when he is no longer in Ehrenfest. I would consider this his way of showing his concern for you."

"Well, I don't want this kind of concern!"

I was doing my best to look outraged, but Rihyarda merely laughed and said that the smile on my face was still clear to see. "We are talking about Lord Ferdinand," she said. "There may be punishments for failure, but there will certainly be rewards for success as well. Study well, milady."

"In that case, I'll raise our grades so high that even Ferdinand won't believe it. Then I'll get him to make all the magic tools I need for my library."

I'll secure what I already have, then wrest even more from his grubby little hands!

After receiving my study materials, I used my Pandabus to get back to the common room, then put it away and got my retainers to prepare a spot for those of us studying for the archduke candidate course. Charlotte was sitting with the other second-years, so it was just Wilfried and me for now.

"Let us study here," I said. "We two are the only Ehrenfest students doing the archduke candidate course this term."

"Right... I'm going to read these first, so start studying without me," Wilfried replied, unenthusiastically staring down at the boards in his hands.

Despite feeling a little confused, I called out to all those gathered. "Please take your seats based on last year's groups. First-years, take that table over there."

As everyone was following their instructions, the children of the former Veronica faction appeared with their study materials. They stood at the entrance and gazed around the room, looking conflicted.

"You're late!" I called. "Please take your seats."

"We all need to pass our exams the first time around," Wilfried added. "We cannot allow Ehrenfest's grades to fall."

One of the kids glared at us, anger flaring in his eyes. "How do you expect us to focus on studying when your father might be killing our families as we speak?"

The atmosphere in the room turned cold. Wilfried and I had been holding our heads high just a moment ago, trying to be enthusiastic, but now our eyes were somberly downcast.

An instant later, Leonore stepped forward with her schtappe in hand. The child was wriggling on the ground before I knew it, entangled in bands of light.

"Wha?!"

“Leonore, what are you doing?!”

“This boy does not seem to understand the position he is in, my lady. Just how poor a job have Matthias and Laurenz done at convincing them?” she mused, her violet eyes now a mixed-up color. I had never seen her like this before.

Matthias looked at me with pleading eyes, completely taken aback. “Lady Rozemyne said that she would save those who are innocent.”

Before I could even attempt a response, Leonore intervened again. “Indeed. You are correct, Matthias. Lady Rozemyne has asked the aub to save those who have committed no crimes. Furthermore, she has prepared a place in the orphanage for those she has been told will not be considered nobles for the purposes of the purge.”

Leonore had a smile on her lips, but it was scarily intense—as was to be expected of someone so emotional that her eyes had changed color.

“Members of the former Veronica faction attempted to kidnap Lady Rozemyne before her baptism,” she continued. “They even managed to poison her, which was the reason for her two-year slumber. And there has been yet another assassination attempt in recent memory. After assaulting the archducal family time and time again, it is only logical that your families must be punished. Guilt by association—the customary approach in situations such as this—would have required even those of you who are innocent to die alongside them, but Lady Rozemyne fought to save you. She agonized over what she could do, and she feels your pain as though it were her own.”

Leonore’s usually so quiet and unassertive that it completely slipped my mind, but... she’s totally a Leisegang noble too!

Just as there were children of the former Veronica faction here in the dormitory, there were Leisegang nobles too. Most of the Leisegang faction were archnobles, and as they tended to serve the archducal family, they were obeying our orders and working to save the lives of the others. On the inside, however, it seemed that they were displeased about our break from tradition.

The blood drained from my face. I had been so busy empathizing with the children of the former Veronica faction that I hadn’t stopped to consider how my own retainers were feeling.

Aah! I’m a terrible lady! I don’t deserve them!

“Those of you who are unsatisfied with being spared—I will readily send you back to Ehrenfest, where you can receive the punishment that should have been forced upon you in the first place.” She then took out a sheet of paper that said “noncompliant” and affixed it to the restrained student.

All those watching couldn't help but swallow; Leonore was usually so calm and composed, so seeing her this openly aggressive had caught everyone off guard. Brunhilde alone seemed unaffected, and she stepped forward in one smooth motion.

"You have made a mistake, Leonore."

"Brunhilde, do not attempt to stop me. I can no longer tolerate watching these ungrateful pests bite the hands of those who have struggled and put so much at risk to save them!"

"I merely wished to point out that the bands of light you are using will not work with the teleportation circle. You must use binding string on him instead."

Lieseleta approached and pulled out some string that was thicker than usual. She pulled it taut with both hands, then stared down at the restrained boy with her usual diligent expression. "We have no need for someone who intends to disturb Lady Rozemyne when her mood is finally improving and she is working to reunite the dormitory. As an attendant, it is my duty to eliminate those who would put my lady's mental health at risk."

I didn't ask for this level of service! I'm healthy! In body and mind alike!

"You are exactly right, Lieseleta. Let us waste no time eliminating them," Brunhilde said. "Even while struggling with the challenges of running the duchy, those of our archducal family have been compassionate enough to fight for the children of so many treasonous adults. I can understand saving those who will put Ehrenfest above all else, but Leisegang has no food for those who cannot understand this great kindness afforded to them—a kindness that they would not have received anywhere else in Yurgenschmidt."

Aah! I forgot that Brunhilde's a Leisegang too! This is bad... My retainers are all going berserk! Somebody stop them!

My eyes darted around the room, seeking help. Hartmut and Cornelius would normally intervene at a time like this, but they were both absent. I went to stand, but Wilfried's and Charlotte's retainers rose first. I couldn't believe my luck—but then I saw that they, too, were wielding their schtappes.

"It was children of the former Veronica faction who took Lord Wilfried to the Ivory Tower—who tarnished his reputation with a stain that will never fade, even with how tirelessly he has been working to cover it," said Alexis, one of Wilfried's apprentice guard knights. He looked over the students, and several gazed down at their feet. Presumably, they were the ones who had been involved.

Natalie was the next to speak. "Lady Charlotte was kidnapped by a member of the former Veronica faction on the very day of her baptism, and she has always blamed herself that Lady Rozemyne was

poisoned while trying to rescue her. Ever since then, she has striven beyond her limits to serve in Lady Rozemyne's place as much as she possibly can."

All eyes fell on Charlotte as it became clear that we archduke candidates had all suffered due to the former Veronica faction.

"If any of you are still displeased with our archduke candidates' efforts and do not intend to put in the work required to pass all of your exams on the first day, then you may be deemed guilty by association," Ignaz said, his eyes harsh. "Can you not see the special treatment you are receiving? Only the archducal family wishes to save you. The rest of us would rather stick with tradition."

The children all weakly averted their gazes, then the restrained first-year finally spoke up. "It's... not that. I, um... I am grateful for the archducal family's consideration. It's just... I wish they could extend that consideration to our parents as well."

Being separated from one's family was agonizing beyond words. My heart bled for the children having to endure this pain, and I wanted to do everything in my power to put their minds at ease. But at the same time...

Charlotte stood up, her indigo eyes scrutinizing the entire room. "That request is fundamentally misplaced and serves only to inconvenience us. Your families have committed crimes, and they will receive the appropriate punishment. Those who are innocent have nothing to fear. We pitied the children who would be deemed guilty only by association and extended our hands to them, but we will show no mercy to any wrongdoers. The path that you choose now is entirely in your own hands."

Ngh. Charlotte's so cool... It feels like she's the one protecting me here.

As the older sister, I needed to be the one stepping forward and protecting Wilfried and Charlotte... but instead, the reverse was happening.

I can't just wait around and let them do everything.

I stood up. Leonore noticed and reached out to me in concern, but I pushed away her hand and gave her a reassuring smile before facing the children of the former Veronica faction. "I may not be able to save your families, but I can save your futures. Those of you who lose your loved ones will in turn lose their support, meaning that you will need to survive on your own merits. Good grades will serve an essential role in your search for another guardian. Ferdinand made this clear to me when I was first being raised in the temple."

Ferdinand had talked incessantly about the importance of me educating myself and adopting noble mannerisms, all so that I could secure as ideal of an environment as possible. It was thanks to his harsh teachings that, during the incident with Count Bindewald, I had

been adopted by the archduke himself and not left to die as a commoner.

“Furthermore, think carefully about what will happen if your families are proven innocent or otherwise only lightly punished,” I continued. “How will you face them knowing that you were responsible for bringing down our duchy’s status? Will you tell them that you could not believe they were innocent? A light punishment may still affect your house’s standing and make your life more difficult, but even then your grades will play a necessary role when you are trying to acquire a job and support your family.”

Matthias’s expression hardened as the other kids anxiously exchanged glances. “Lady Rozemyne... I understand that Ehrenfest’s grades are important, but I cannot support any children of the former Veronica faction leaving the dormitory. Ensuring that we all study is important, but we fear that sensitive information may be leak—”

“That won’t be a problem,” Wilfried interjected. He held up a board and waved it from side to side. “I just received an update from Ehrenfest. The purge is almost complete. Details on the actual punishments will come later, but by the tests tomorrow, it won’t matter who leaks what.”

Everyone stared at the board in shock. Things had progressed faster than any of us had expected. Sylvester and the others had evidently chosen to prioritize speed above all else.

“We are beyond the point of no return,” I said. “You may now choose—will you begin studying and secure passing marks tomorrow, or will you be sent back to Ehrenfest restrained like this student here? The decision is yours, and we will respect whichever you choose.”

There was nothing more to be said, so I returned to my seat. We truly were running out of time if we wanted to secure the grades that Ferdinand sought.

“Brunhilde, Lieseleta, focus on your studies,” I said. “You are both aiming to finally become honor students this year, correct?”

“Indeed. This year is a prime opportunity for us.”

The archducal retainers turned on their heels and threw themselves into their studies, at which point Matthias and Laurenz did the same. The other students gradually began to follow suit, and those of the former Veronica faction were no exception—although they did give the room a cautious glance before doing so.

“Please undo my bindings! I want to study too!” cried the boy whom Leonore had restrained. He had been left alone by the door and started flailing about like a desperate fish on a chopping board.

“Did you not wish to return to your family in Ehrenfest?” Leonore asked.

“My family is innocent, so they won’t have been punished. I

believe in them.”

Leonore undid the boy’s bindings, seemingly content with that answer, and watched as he ran to join the first-year table with his study materials in hand.

The New Librarian

Every single Ehrenfest student attended their classes the next day, and before we knew it...

“All the first-years passed!”

Theodore gleefully reported this achievement, overjoyed to have passed his first-ever class. We shared in his excitement while we all ate lunch together. Brunhilde had informed me that the fifth-years had all passed with ease, and we third-years had, of course, done the same.

“That said, Theodore—we third-years not only passed, but we also did so with perfect marks. Heh heh heh...”

I couldn’t suppress a chuckle. As third-years, we had exams for both our shared classes and our specialty courses. Today we had done the exams for our shared classes, which required us to recall the names of all the gods. Naturally, this was a simple task for those of us who had been raised with karuta and picture books. It was so easy, in fact, that it had actually been a little underwhelming.

“If your exam was that straightforward, then even I would have gotten a perfect score,” Theodore muttered. “I wish I were a third-year already...”

I turned my attention to his sister. “Judithe, the fourth-years have written lessons this afternoon, correct?”

“Correct. And we’re all going to pass,” she replied with a confident grin. “We didn’t spend the past year studying for nothing.”

Theodore joked that she would need to be careful about tripping over her own feet and somehow failing—and it was then that an ordonnanz flew in.

“Lady Rozemyne, this is Solange. The Sovereignty has sent a new librarian and asked that she be registered with Schwartz and Weiss. When will you have the time to come by?”

The message repeated twice more, and the joy in her voice was unmistakable. She had waited years for another librarian to be sent from the Sovereignty, and now she wouldn’t need to spend the majority of the year all alone, nor would she have to do all the work by herself.

I gazed up at Rihyarda, who was serving me, and she nodded with a smile. “The registration should not take long. We may head there after eating. The librarian will certainly struggle to carry out her

duties without having Schwartz and Weiss registered to her. I must stress, however, that there will not be any time for you to read, milady."

"N-Not even a little?" I asked, desperate. It hadn't taken very long at all to register Hildebrand and Hannelore, so I couldn't see why we wouldn't have time.

Rihyarda sighed. "I will shut your book the very instant the library signals it is time to leave, whether you like it or not."

Woo-hoo! Library time! Library time!

I told Solange that I would be going to the library after lunch, then asked my retainers to prepare.

Theodore smiled. "This is exciting. I've never been to the Royal Academy's library before."

"Um... as you have not yet been registered, I am afraid you cannot accompany us today," I said. I understood the joys of one's first trip to the library painfully well, but he would simply have to wait.

Theodore slumped over, clearly disappointed. "So out of all your retainers, I'm the only one who has to stay behind...?"

"I will make arrangements for you and the other new students to be registered. Please be patient until then," I said, trying to console him both as his lady and as an older student. In truth, however, I was struggling not to break into a smile.

Because, I mean, his pouty expression makes him look just like Judithe whenever she's all, "But I'm a guard knight too"! They really are siblings!

There was no denying that the similarity was adorable, but I elected to stifle my laughter; pointing it out now would only make Theodore feel even worse. But then Judithe tipped me over the edge. "Pouting like that in front of your lady is embarrassing!" she said, wagging a finger at him and putting on a "big sister" face despite the fact that she always pouted as well.

Unable to contain it any longer, I suddenly burst into laughter—and then my retainers all did the same.

"Wh-What's with everyone?" she asked. "What's going on?"

We couldn't stop laughing. They were even similar in how they looked around at us all, lost for words. It took Leonore, who was holding a hand over her mouth to maintain some semblance of elegance, to clarify.

"Theodore's pouting expression looks identical to your own when you wail about not receiving work as a guard knight, Judithe."

"We are *not* identical, Leonore!" they both shouted at the exact same time—which only served to make us laugh even harder.

And so we started toward the library, leaving behind Theodore, who was still pouting about us all having laughed at him. Lieseleta

spoke cautiously as we trudged down the hallway.

“Um, Lady Rozemyne... does this new librarian mean that you will no longer be Schwartz and Weiss’s master?”

“I imagine so? Schwartz and Weiss are the library’s magic tools, and their master was once an archnoble librarian, so it makes sense that I would return them now.”

I had been providing the two shumils with mana both to make my time in the library more comfortable and to assist with its management, but it wasn’t like I was invested in being their master. It was best for them to go to the new archnoble librarian, whom Solange had so fervently hoped for while running the library by her lonesome.

“Even knowing that this is how things must be, I cannot help but feel it is a shame...” Lieseleta said, resting a hand on her cheek and letting out a truly disappointed sigh. It was a rare sight; she seldom expressed her feelings so openly. “Their new master will need to prepare new clothes for them, I presume? I went out of my way to fashion some new outfits for them to wear, but it seems we will not have an opportunity to use them.”

Because we had put all of our embroidery on the vest and apron, we could swap out any other parts of the shumils’ clothes with ease. Lieseleta had apparently made a new dress and pair of pants for them.

“You truly do love shumils, don’t you?” Philine and Judithe said in perfect unison before heaving emotional sighs.

Lieseleta blushed a little, embarrassed. “I do, but I did this to market Ehrenfest’s new dyeing method.”

“Well, at the very least, it will take some time for the new clothes to be prepared after the exchange. It took us an entire year, even with Ferdinand assisting us. If we first consult Professor Solange and the new librarian, then I am sure they will allow us to provide Schwartz and Weiss with new outfits for the year.”

It was possible that the Sovereignty could prepare new clothes faster than we could in Ehrenfest, but even then, I couldn’t imagine that they would be finished prior to Lieseleta’s graduation.

It certainly will prove a challenge, trying to supply Schwartz and Weiss with mana while at the same time dyeing the cloth and thread for their embroidery.

“Lady Rozemyne, thank you ever so much for taking the time to come to the library on your very busy first day.”

Solange greeted me from outside the reading room, having been waiting with Schwartz and Weiss. We exchanged the usual, lengthy noble greetings, then began walking to the office. Only now that I was here in the library did I really feel that I was back at the Royal Academy.

“It is good that a new librarian has been sent from the Sovereignty, but she will not be able to do her work if she cannot touch Schwartz and Weiss,” Solange explained. “As she is an archnoble, I thought it best that we transition ownership to her as soon as possible.”

It seemed that she felt deeply troubled about relying on a student for their mana when they needed it for their classes. She also regretted that my ownership of the two shumils had forced me into a ditter game against Dunkelfelger that I would rather have avoided.

“Furthermore, you are taking both the scholar and archduke candidate courses starting this year, no?” Solange continued. “Taking two courses at once will require a great deal of mana, so I am glad the librarian arrived in time for this year.” Her blue eyes wrinkled in a caring smile, and the realization that she had genuinely been worried for me made a warmth spread through my chest.

“I, too, am glad you finally have somebody to work with, Professor Solange, after spending so long working in the library alone.”

“Oh, yes. Even just having someone to speak with cannot be compared to working alone. This new librarian is a bookworm like you, Lady Rozemyne, so I am sure you will become fast friends.”

“I am looking forward to meeting her. Her being a woman is also convenient, as she shouldn’t take issue with the tools calling her ‘milady.’”

We continued toward Solange’s office. I was excited to see what kind of person this bookworm librarian was... but when we stepped inside, she was far from the only one waiting for me.

“Professor Solange... isn’t there only one new librarian?” I asked.

“Indeed, but as this is the handover of a royal heirloom, it was decided that royalty should also be present. You were an exception, Lady Rozemyne, as you registered your mana without even touching them.”

I averted my eyes, aware that it was exceptionally bizarre to become the owner of two magic tools by praying to the gods out of excitement and popping out a blessing after registering at a library. Even I started to blink in surprise when I thought back on the things I had done.

Aaanyway... Royals must have it rough if they’re obligated to attend even a simple registration. Or, actually... is this kind of thing why there always needs to be a member of the royal family in the Royal Academy?

“Rozemyne.”

“Lady Rozemyne. It has been some time.”

Our arrival clearly hadn’t gone unnoticed. The royal family’s retainers moved to the walls to make space—and to my surprise,

Hildebrand wasn't my only unexpected guest. Eglantine was with him as well. I widened my eyes, not having expected to see her.

"Lady Eglantine, why are you here at the Royal Academy?" I asked.

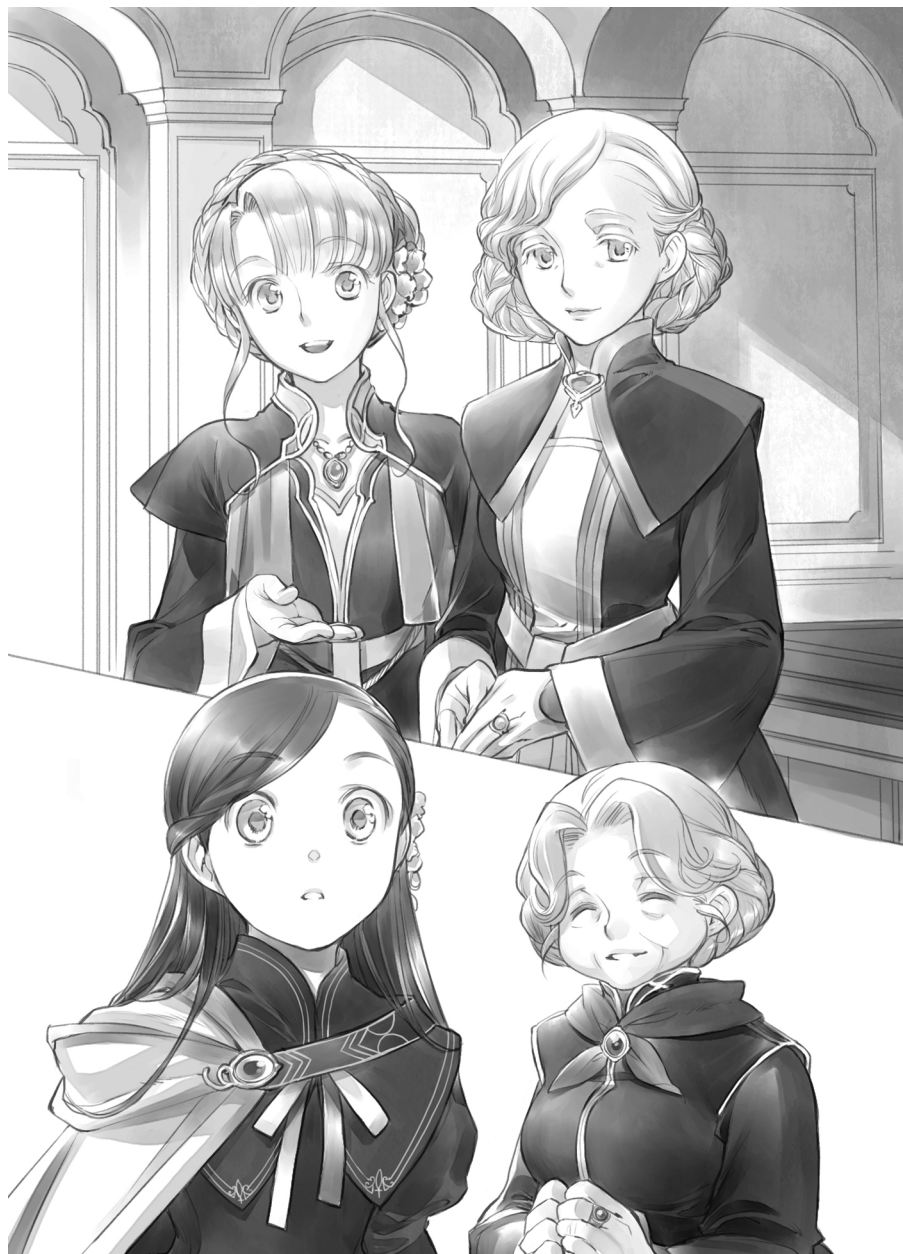
"Ahaha. Surprised, I see. In truth, I have been tasked with serving as the professor of the archduke candidate course. We will be seeing a lot more of each other from now on."

The professor who had been teaching the archduke candidate course before was a fairly old member of a branch of the royal family and had told the king that they wished to retire soon. Eglantine had then been selected as a replacement.

A noblewoman marrying a prince and then becoming an academy professor, hm? True love stories are stranger than fiction.

I certainly hadn't considered that I might see Eglantine again in the Royal Academy—let alone as one of my professors. It was a surprise, but also a welcome one, as the last thing I wanted was another professor like Fraularm bothering me.

"Lady Rozemyne, allow me to introduce you," Eglantine said, then indicated the forty-something-year-old next to her. "This is Hortensia, the Royal Academy's new archnoble librarian."



Hortensia had distinctive, light-blue hair, and she exuded a kindness similar to Eglantine's. Judging by her age, she was likely a scholar just returning to work after raising her children. It was good to know that she would probably mesh well with Solange.

"I should point out that I could have done this on my own," Hildebrand informed me. "Lady Eglantine asked me if she could attend as well. I do not need her help or anything."

The thought hadn't even crossed my mind, but I recalled Sylvester saying before that Hildebrand wasn't massively aware of his status as a royal. Maybe part of the reason for Eglantine being here really was to ensure that he carried out his duty correctly.

"Hortensia was from Klassenberg before she moved to the Sovereignty," Eglantine said. "The two of us have spent some time together in the past, so I came to introduce her myself. I also wished to see you again, Lady Rozemyne, so I could not pass up this opportunity." She then gave me a smile that contained a hint of playfulness—in notable contrast to Hortensia's more reserved expression. Still, the two women came across as very similar. Thinking back, the dormitory supervisor Primevere seemed much the same. Maybe all women from Klassenberg were this kind and gentle.

And as an aside, Eglantine is even more beautiful now that she's gotten married and is living such a joyous life...

"Lady Rozemyne, may I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?" Hortensia asked, snapping me back to reality. She had stepped forward and knelt while I was looking over Eglantine.

I stood up straight and said, "You may."

"I am Hortensia. I look forward to working with you."

Once the light of the blessing had flown and our greetings were concluded, Hortensia stood up and turned to Solange. "This may run into Lady Rozemyne's afternoon class if we do not move things along. Solange, how does one go about changing the tools' master?"

"The former master will grant you permission to touch Schwartz and Weiss, which will allow you to touch the feystones on their foreheads and start to overwrite her mana with your own," Solange explained. It was a similar process to when Hildebrand and Hannelore had registered their mana.

"Lady Rozemyne, may I take ownership of the tools?" Hortensia asked me with a calm smile.

Everyone in the room tensed up at once. Watching me were two members of the royal family and their retainers—many more people than I had expected. I never would have thought that a handover of royal heirlooms would draw so much attention.

I guess I remember someone saying that becoming the master of a royal magic tool is a great honor or something?

Feeling a little awkward with so many eyes on me, I called Schwartz and Weiss over. Naturally, I took care to warn others not to touch them, then said, “Schwartz, Weiss, I grant Professor Hortensia permission to touch you both, such that she might register herself as your new master.”

“Hortensia. Permission granted.”

“Registering.”

Hortensia reached out and touched their feystones—and with that, the mana registration was complete.

“But, Solange, we did the same thing when I registered with them...” Hildebrand said, his confusion clear on his face. “Is that really all you have to do to become their master?”

“Oh, no, Your Highness. Hortensia will become their master only when the mana she has supplied them surpasses Lady Rozemyne’s. It may take some time, as I just finished resupplying them with mana from her feystone the other day.”

Solange then returned the large feystone that she had used from spring to autumn, offering me a few words of gratitude as she did so. I gave the feystone to Rihyarda and asked her to put it away.

“What is that feystone?” Hildebrand asked.

“It would be problematic if Schwartz and Weiss were to stop moving between spring and autumn, so Lady Rozemyne lent me this feystone containing her mana,” Solange replied, which made everyone present widen their eyes.

“She gave you a feystone that large...?” Hildebrand asked. “Is it really that big of a deal if the magic tools stop working when nobody’s attending the Academy?”

Now I was the confused one. Winter certainly was the busiest time of year for Solange, but she had work to do during the other seasons too—plus, she needed Schwartz and Weiss around so that she wouldn’t be so alone.

“The library struggles to run without Schwartz and Weiss,” I said. “And as I am so enamored with books, it is obvious that I would use my mana to make the library more comfortable.”

“Is it obvious...?”

“But of course. I do not think it that surprising that someone would spend their mana on what is precious to them...”

“Lady Rozemyne certainly does love books to a shocking degree,” Solange said with a knowing smile. “Her efforts have saved me on many an occasion. Oh, and that reminds me—Lady Rozemyne, do take care not to supply mana to Schwartz and Weiss until the change in ownership has stabilized. If you continue to supply them, then the

change may never occur no matter how much time passes.”

In other words, she was asking me to stop doing work for my Library Committee. It was a shame, but I nodded in agreement; I understood what a huge problem I would cause otherwise.

“I worry that I might still touch them by instinct, so I will avoid coming to the library as much as I can moving forward,” I said.

“What...?” Hildebrand muttered. My retainers—and everyone else, for that matter—were similarly blinking in surprise.

Solange alone smiled and nodded. “Indeed,” she said. “As you are taking two courses this year, I ask that you focus on your studies like any other student.”

“Oh my. But, as it stands, I am already fully prepared,” I replied, my chest puffed out.

“I would expect nothing less. You are as reliable as always.”

Hildebrand watched on in a daze. “But will you be able to resist the urge to read books...?” he asked, his voice almost a whisper.

“I will not, no—nor do I plan to,” I replied. “I recently came into possession of something that I sought for so long: my own library.”

“Whaaat?!”

“Thus, I am taking inspiration from the library here in the Royal Academy and will spend this year researching magic tools that I can use in my own. There are a great many documents that I intend to reference to this end, so I will not have any shortage of reading material. I shall work my hardest to make my dream library a reality.”

“How wonderful,” Solange said, sharing in my celebration. “You are searching for ways to make magic tools as efficient as possible, as you told me last year, correct? Please do show me what you come up with. We may want some here as well.”

Even now that Hortensia was here, Solange was still expressing an interest in my redesigned magic tools. She must have picked up on my confusion, as she went on to tell me more about the library.

“Back when I first started serving here, there were three archnoble and two mednoble librarians. Some previous generations had even more staff. There is still going to be a limit to what Hortensia and I can accomplish together, and for that reason, we would very much appreciate you assistants continuing to provide us your mana—though only in a capacity that does not burden you. Lady Rozemyne—we must, of course, ask you to wait until your ownership has been fully transferred.”

It seemed that my Library Committee wasn’t being disbanded just yet. That was a relief.

“Do send word once the ownership has been transferred. Then I can start providing my assistance again. Oh, and incidentally—I wish to schedule the registration of new students,” I said, suddenly

recalling that Theodore was waiting all alone back at the dormitory.

Solange took out a board and started to write something. "I see that we can expect Ehrenfest first once again. Understood. I will send a letter once everything has been decided. And with that said... will we be having another bookworm tea party this year?"

"A bookworm tea party?" Hortensia asked.

"Indeed. We come together to have tea and exchange books. It is something that I very much look forward to after having spent such a long time here on my own. Though with Lady Rozemyne taking two courses and the matter of Schwartz and Weiss's ownership, we may not have an opportunity this year."

Solange had evidently been looking forward to our tea parties together, and realizing this made me want to hold another one no matter what.

"I already have some new books to offer," I said. "We may have to hold the tea party later than we did last year, but I would certainly love for us to have another—assuming that I can finish my classes before the library becomes busy, that is."

"Lady Rozemyne, do allow me to attend, if so. I can recommend a few books of my own," Hortensia said.

My eyes lit up at the very idea; a Sovereign noble from Klassenberg was bound to recommend some books that I didn't even know about. "I will strive to finish my classes as soon as possible."

"Rozemyne, I want to join too," Hildebrand said, suggesting himself with a smile. It made sense that he wanted to join us, since he had attended our previous tea party, but...

This isn't good... I was told to avoid interacting with the royal family and the Sovereignty. What should I do?

Arthur, who was standing behind the prince, received this idea with a strict frown. Eglantine looked equally troubled as she said, "It is not proper for a member of the royal family to make a request of others in such a manner. Furthermore, did Lady Rozemyne not collapse during last year's tea party? I am sure that she received quite a scolding from Aub Ehrenfest for passing out in the presence of royalty."

"Is that true, Rozemyne?" Hildebrand asked, looking at me anxiously.

Telling him that it hadn't been a problem would ease his worries, but I wanted to keep our interactions to a minimum. Everyone had given me so many warnings already, and I still wasn't sure what I should and shouldn't say. At the same time, however, saying that Sylvester *had* scolded me would probably make Hildebrand less likely to attend. I didn't know how to answer.

"Thus, in order for Lady Rozemyne to avoid another scolding, it

would be best for us to invite her instead,” Eglantine informed the prince. “Lady Rozemyne, what say we have another tea party when you are in good health?”

“That would be delightful, Lady Eglantine.” Her position as my guardian angel hadn’t changed even now that she had graduated, so I eagerly accepted her help.

That’s Lady Eglantine for you!

There was no longer any time for me to read, so I got ready to head to my afternoon class. Schwartz and Weiss hopped over to see me off, but as I went to leave, they pointed at the door to the reading room.

“Milady. Pray.”

“Gramps is waiting.”

That reminded me—they had said something similar last year and then pushed me to pray to the Mestionora statue on the second floor. Maybe this “gramps” wanted mana once per year or something. It hadn’t come up since, so the whole thing had completely slipped my mind.

Still, I was told to hold off on supplying my mana... I thought.

Hortensia would need to start supplying hers as their new owner.

“Schwartz, Weiss—it has become Professor Hortensia’s job to provide you with mana, so you should seek her assistance instead of mine henceforth,” I announced. “I will start coming by to help out once the change in ownership is complete.” I then reached out, stroked their feystones... and supplied them with a little bit of mana.

Ah, whoops... Force of habit. At this rate, the ownership will never transfer over. I’ll just keep things simple and stay in Professor Hirschur’s lab this year.

Practical: Divine Protections of the Gods

The aim of my afternoon practical was to obtain the divine protections of the gods. Doing this for the elemental aptitudes that one was born with made using spells of those elements that much easier. It was a very important class that was held right after third-years separated into their specialist courses.

We were going to be performing the practical one by one, at the shrine to the gods located at the back of the Royal Academy's auditorium. Those of us who had passed the theology exam—which had required us to memorize the names of all the gods—were gathered together, no matter our status. Everyone from Ehrenfest had passed, so every single one of our third-years was here.

"This is going to be our first practical together, Lady Rozemyne," Philine said, a smile playing on her lips as we made our way to the auditorium. She was right; every other practical up to this point had required us to be separated according to status.

It sure is cute seeing her so excited.

As I was enjoying the peaceful atmosphere, Philine rummaged through her things and then pulled out her diptych. "Hartmut instructed me to record what divine protections you obtain here."

"Philine and I will be splitting the workload, so you can get protection from as many subordinates as you want," Roderick proudly added as he took out his own diptych.

Hartmut! You huge, huge, huge dummy! Why would you tell them to do that?!

"There is no need for that," I replied. "I shall scold Hartmut at a later date for wasting your time with such trifling requests." It was hard to say what he was hoping for, but I was the only person who needed to know what protections I obtained. It wasn't something for my retainers to be writing down.

The auditorium was filled with those taking this afternoon's lesson. A simple glance showed that most were wearing either Drewanchel's emerald-green capes or our own dark-yellow ones, with students of other colors being countable on a single hand. In total, our class numbered in the low twenties; memorizing the names of all the gods evidently wasn't quite so easy.

As we approached the Ehrenfest group, I noticed that Wilfried and Ortwin were in mid-conversation. "What was all that about your duchy struggling to pass because so many of your students were sick?" the latter asked.

"My bad," Wilfried replied. "Seems I tricked you without meaning to. But trust me, we were dealing with circumstances beyond our control. From this point on, Ehrenfest is going all out." It was an excellent way of combining an apology with a taunt.

I decided to cheer Wilfried on in silence, not wanting to intrude upon this friendship between bros. As I gazed around the auditorium, I noticed the blue-caped Hannelore standing all alone. It seemed that she was the only Dunkelfelger third-year to have passed on the first day.

I would expect nothing less from my fellow bookworm!

"Lady Hannelore! How do you do?" I called, approaching her with a smile. She turned to me and smiled as well.

"How do you do, Lady Rozemyne? I see that everyone from Ehrenfest is here. How truly wonderful. I struggled so much trying to memorize the names of all the gods."

"As did I."

"Oh, really?" Hannelore asked, blinking in surprise.

"I was assigned to be High Bishop at the same time as my baptism, so I was given almost no time to learn the names of the gods used in the temple's rituals. Even now, I remember my despair as I pored over the bible. It was only because of that experience that I found our class this morning rather easy."

"To think you were made the High Bishop so soon..." Hannelore sighed, her expression clouding over as though to say, "I can't believe they would put you in such a place." It seemed that temples had a poor reputation even in Dunkelfelger.

Wait... Is this going to add to the rumor that Sylvester is a cruel aub? I should probably clarify... and it makes sense to start with those I can speak to directly.

"I do not know how the temple is viewed in other duchies, but it is a pleasant and comfortable place in Ehrenfest," I said. "The aub visits it personally, and although Wilfried and Charlotte do not have official positions there, they assist with the rituals. Ferdinand was even reluctant to leave it when his engagement to Ahrensbach was decided."

"The aub goes there, and Lord Ferdinand was reluctant to leave? Truly?" Hannelore asked, her eyes wandering to Philine and Roderick. She was clearly in disbelief, but I hadn't told a single lie. Sylvester had infiltrated the temple as a blue priest and even attended Spring Prayer, while Ferdinand had loved holing up in his workshop to do

research.

Philine nodded with a smile. “Roderick and I began visiting the temple after becoming Lady Rozemyne’s retainers. It is spotlessly clean, and the food is delicious as well. Not to mention, the attendants there are trained to the same level as the nobility.”

“Now that Lord Ferdinand has gone to Ahrensbach, we have Hartmut as our new High Priest,” Roderick added. “He has been visiting the temple quite eagerly.”

It occurred to me then that I needed to give Clarissa a letter. It was my duty as Hartmut’s lady to explain the circumstances surrounding his entering the temple and taking on his current position. The purge really had pushed so many other things from my memory.

“There seem to be noticeable differences between the temples in our duchies,” I said. “I will speak to Clarissa—who is engaged to Hartmut—about the details at a later date.”

“O-Oh. Certainly. I will inform her for you,” Hannelore said, maintaining a smile but blinking rapidly. Something had apparently thrown her mind into complete chaos, so I said a swift farewell and went on my way.

Well, hopefully that makes people reconsider those bad rumors about Sylvester, even if only a little.

Now that I was on my own again, I told Philine and Roderick to go over the names of the gods. “As one can only take this lesson after passing the theology exam, memorizing those names is more important than anything else,” I said. “I do not care about Hartmut’s request in the least; the two of you need to focus on yourselves.”

A noble’s elemental aptitudes were determined at birth. One generally had the element of one’s birth season, with the rest being influenced by the elements of one’s parents, so siblings tended to have similar elements.

One’s mana quantity also depended on the size of one’s vessel, which in turn depended on how much mana a pregnant mother channeled into her child. As a result, it wasn’t uncommon for there to be disparities even among siblings. One’s vessel grew along with one’s body, and one’s mana quantity depended on how much mana was compressed during one’s growth period.

“The divine protections you obtain have a considerable impact on what spells and what amount of mana you can use,” I said. “If you two are bemoaning your lack of aptitudes, I would recommend that you start praying carefully so that you can obtain them sooner rather than later. Okay?”

Wilfried, having finished talking with Ortwin, came over with a quizzical expression. “I know it’s said that acquiring divine protections

and taking certain actions can give you more elements, but I've never heard of anyone in class getting divine protections from an element they didn't already have." This was news to me, but that wasn't much of a surprise; I wasn't exactly the most informed when it came to Royal Academy affairs.

"Still, the textbooks say that one can improve their elements, so it must be true," I said. "Though I *have* heard of someone failing to obtain a divine protection despite having the necessary element."

"What?! They had the aptitude but *still* couldn't get divine protections?!" Wilfried exclaimed, shocked. "I've never heard of that happening before."

It wasn't something that had warranted mention before, entirely because it had never come up in conversation, but Angelica hadn't been able to get one of her primary divine protections. It was such a rare occurrence that some people—Wilfried included, until just a moment ago—were unaware it could even happen.

"In truth... it was Angelica," I said. "Despite having an aptitude for Wind, she failed to get divine protection for it. I'd understand her not getting a response from Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom or Kunstzeal the Goddess of Art, but I find it so strange she couldn't even get anything from Ordoschnelli the Goddess of Couriers or Steifebrise the Goddess of the Gale."

Schutzaria was the symbol of protection and speed, associated in particular with the fast delivery of messages, so it was only natural that her subordinates were known for their swiftness. I had thought that Angelica would receive protection from them all, what with her light nature and speed-focused fighting style, but that hadn't happened.

Philine paled. "What will I do if the gods of the one element I possess do not grant me their divine protections?" She was going to be appealing to Wind as well.

"There is nothing for you to worry about," said none other than Hirschur, who was cackling to herself as she entered the room.

"What makes you so sure?" Philine asked, still clearly anxious.

"Because I know precisely why Angelica failed to obtain the protection she sought. I, too, was forced to assist with her studies as her dormitory supervisor."

It seemed that dormitory supervisors had to take responsibility for students who were unable to pass during the winter term and needed to attend remedial classes in spring. Hirschur sighed and added that it had truly been a nightmare.

"Professor Hirschur, please do tell me why Angelica failed to receive the divine protection of Wind."

"It was because she proved unable to remember the names of the

gods and could not give the required prayer.”

“What...?”

That doesn't make any sense. You need to have passed the test proving that you remember the names of all the gods before you can even take this class. What is Professor Hirschur saying?

“She may have been a season later than most everyone else, but Angelica took this class right after passing the exam retake, as is standard. She clearly experienced some kind of mental lapse, though I cannot be sure as to what actually happened. Perhaps she forgot all the names immediately after the test because she thought she no longer had need for them, or perhaps she only vaguely remembered them to begin with. It could be that she expended all her energy remembering the prayer itself. Only the gods know. But in the end, she failed to say the names upon the magic circle. She merely waited there with her head tilted to one side.”

Oh nooo... I can totally imagine Angelica getting into her “oh dear” pose atop the magic circle.

I could also picture Hirschur standing beside the magic circle with her head in her hands. Even when working together, those of us in the Raise Angelica's Grades Squadron had struggled to get Angelica to pass. I could only imagine how much Hirschur had suffered on her own.

“So if one can't say the names of the gods correctly, they won't receive their protections?” Wilfried asked.

“The gods must not want to assist those who cannot even remember their names,” Hirschur replied. “I cannot express how relieved I am that Angelica was able to graduate—even if only due to Lady Rozemyne's influence as her lady.”

Hirschur then moved to the front of the room. She and Gundolf, an old man who was both her research buddy and rival, were our professors for this class. Maybe they had been selected because most of the students here were from Ehrenfest and Drewanchel.

“Aah. Not many people here today,” Gundolf said. “Everyone, move up to the front.”

We all did as instructed—and instinctively sat in order of our duchies' rankings. This made the unusual fact that everyone from Ehrenfest had passed even more apparent.

“Now, bring it here,” Hirschur said.

A man dressed like a servant stepped forward with Hirschur's magic tool—the same projector thing she had used for last year's class. She set it up, then turned around to face us all.

“Now then—I shall explain the ritual for receiving the divine protections of the gods.”

To summarize, one had to start by memorizing the prayer. Those

who were quickest to memorize it would perform the ritual first. Only one person was going to be allowed to enter the Farthest Hall with the shrine at a time, to prevent distractions, and everyone else could use the extra time to study for tomorrow's written lesson. Those who finished their ritual would be allowed to leave.

"This is the prayer," Hirschur said, then used her magic tool to project the words onto some white cloth. I was nervous at first, but the tension quickly drained from my body when I saw the words that were written.

It's basically the same prayer as always. "I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world. O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, O Goddess of Water Flutrane, O God of Fire Leidenschaft, O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, O Goddess of Earth Geduldh, O God of Life Ewigeliebe. We honor you who have blessed all beings with life, and pray that we may be blessed further with your divine might..."

The main difference was that this prayer, unlike those for the Dedication Ritual and Mana Replenishment, also included the names of the subordinate gods. The speaker then had to conclude with the line: "Let me be granted the protection of those divinities who grace my prayers with their approval."

"That's surprisingly simple," I observed.

"Sure, it's just like the Mana Replenishment prayer, but can you really call it simple?" Wilfried asked. "You can't make a single mistake when repeating it."

Now that he mentioned it, I noticed that everyone around us was mumbling to themselves as they attempted to memorize the prayer. To my surprise, even Ortwin and Hannelore were wearing hard expressions, despite them being from the archducal families of greater duchies and presumably used to helping with Mana Replenishment.

Well, that was no reason for me to waste any more time. I stood up at once and said, "Professor Hirschur, I have memorized the prayer."

All eyes fell on me, and Hirschur gave an exasperated sigh. "Lady Rozemyne, is this not much too soon?" she asked.

"I mean, I *am* the High Bishop. This is almost identical to the prayer I usually give at the temple, but with a few more words added on."

"Is that so?" she asked. Everyone was now blinking in surprise.

I nodded with a smile, hoping that my efforts would improve everyone's opinions of the temple. "The prayer is also similar to the one given when performing Mana Replenishment on the foundational magic, so I would not consider it strange for an archduke candidate to have memorized it so quickly."

“A prayer when performing Mana Replenishment?” Ortwin said. “As far as I’m aware, there’s no such thing.”

Hannelore nodded in agreement.

Wilfried exchanged a glance with me, then turned back to Ortwin. “The aub, my sisters, and I—in Ehrenfest, we all pray while performing Mana Replenishment. Is that not the case in Drewanchel or Dunkelfelger?”

“In Drewanchel, it’s uncommon for us to perform Mana Replenishment at all, since we have so many adults in our archducal family... but when we do perform it, all we do is put our hands on and channel our mana into the magic circle. I’ve never said a prayer for it.”

Hirschur clapped her hands together and said, “Let us leave it at that,” interrupting Wilfried and Ortwin’s increasingly heated conversation. “Perhaps the practice changed over the long history of your duchies. We can discuss the possible merits of researching this further *after* class. First, memorize the prayer.”

Nobody was talking about researching it, though...

Hirschur and Gundolf were both grinning. I had something of a bad feeling about this, but before I could dwell on the matter any further, Hirschur gestured me over.

“Okay, Lady Rozemyne. This way.”

Hirschur took me to the shrine in the Farthest Hall through a door in the back of the auditorium, leaving Gundolf to oversee the other students. It was larger than the shrine in the temple’s chapel, but the setup was the same—statues of the gods, and the same red carpet used for the Dedication Ritual. Offerings such as flowers and incense were also prepared, so, excluding the lack of chalices, it was basically identical to what I was used to. The biggest change was the large carpet embroidered with a magic circle of all the elements. Praying there would most likely send mana to the shrine.

“I just need to kneel in the center of the circle and pray, right?” I asked.

“Indeed. You always save me the need to waste time with explanations.”

I stepped into the circle and faced the shrine, as I would for the Dedication Ritual, then knelt down. I placed my hands on the circle and slowly began channeling mana into it.

“I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world...”

I went on to invoke the supreme gods and the Eternal Five. Each name that passed my lips caused the circle to shine brighter and a beam of the respective element’s color to shoot up from the appropriate symbol.

“Light for all of the elements... Could it be...?” Hirschur mumbled, shocked. The room was so quiet that I could very clearly hear what she was saying.

I continued to channel mana into the circle while carefully listing the name of each subordinate god. By the time I was done, about half of the names had produced a reaction. Each one had made the light shine brighter and the elemental pillars grow taller. All that remained was the last line of the prayer.

“Let me be granted the protection of those divinities who grace my prayers with their approval.”

Light from the seven elemental pillars shot up into the air above my head, flashing and spinning together in what looked to be a boisterous dance. The light then rained down upon me and flowed across the red carpet, each color being sucked into its respective statue.

I gazed up in awe, taken aback by the divine beauty of the display—then a low rumbling caught my attention. The statues began to spin as if performing a dedication whirl, all the while moving to either side of the shrine.

“Wha? Wha-wa-wa?! Professor Hirschur, what’s going on?!” I asked, turning back to her. She was looking up at the shrine with an expression that made it hard to tell whether she was surprised.

“It’s entirely like what happened during Ferdinand’s ritual. I somewhat anticipated this, but to think it actually came to be...”

“This happened with Ferdinand too?” I asked.

“Indeed. He looked up with a curious expression and said something along the lines of ‘Hm, is this not one of the mysteries passed down in the Royal Academy?’ It was then that he began to investigate them all.”

Ferdinand and Hirschur sure are tough to surprise, huh? It must take a lot of composure to think about research in the face of something so bizarre.

Hirschur pointed at the altar and said, “They are about finished.” Indeed, it looked entirely as though the statues, after having twirled and twirled, had created a path for me. And now that the supreme King and Queen had moved, there was a hole visible in the mosaic-patterned wall. “Go forth, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Um... where?”

“To the distant heights, as per your invitation from the two supreme gods.”

Her phrasing made it sound entirely as though I was headed to the afterlife. I wished that she would be less ominous, but before I could say anything—

“If you do not hurry, the hole will not close, and you will

inconvenience the next student. You may use your highbeast. Just be quick.”

Hirschur was practically shooing me away, so I produced Lessy and went to the top of the staircase where the two supreme gods were waiting. I didn’t have the stamina to reach the entrance myself.

After reaching the top of the stairs, I climbed out of my Pandabus. The supreme gods had originally been holding hands in what had appeared to be a romantic gesture, but now that they were apart, they were pointing to the way forward.

Entering the square hole was very much like going into the Mana Replenishment hall—I needed to pass through an iridescent film, similar in appearance to an oil slick, that was wavering in empty space. I couldn’t tell what was beyond it, and, like my first time entering the Mana Replenishment hall, my whole body tensed up as I stepped through.

“C-Coming in...” I called.

The moment I passed through the iridescent barrier, my environment changed. I was suddenly standing on a circle of pure-white stone, at the center of which was a giant white tree seemingly made of the same material. Its trunk stretched up into the heavens, its branches were splayed wide, and through its leaves streamed gentle light.

I remembered this scenery.

“This is...”

It was the white plaza where I had obtained my Divine Will. I already had my schtappe, so there wasn’t anything new here. The big white tree was just as big and white as ever.

“Hm... Students used to get their schtappes and divine protections at the same time—when graduating. Maybe they found their schtappes here incidentally after getting their protections?”

Maybe the intended way of things was for someone to spend their days studying and praying until they came of age and stopped growing—and only then would they receive their schtappe and protections.

“Though, well... that doesn’t mean anything to me. I guess Ferdinand got his schtappe here when he was a third-year?”

I watched the white plaza for a while... but nothing happened. I decided to return to the shrine through the iridescent film, feeling a little annoyed. Had I come this way when getting my Divine Will, then I wouldn’t have ended up collapsing.

That walk was super long. Like, seriously.

I gazed down from the top of the shrine and saw both Hirschur and the magic circle.

Hm... I could copy out that magic circle. Would that give Angelica a

second chance to perform the ritual, I wonder?

Perhaps I could even modify the prayer to help her get the divine protection of Wind, making it so that she only needed to memorize the goddesses overseeing speed and whatever else she wanted. With that in mind, I took out my diptych and recorded the magic circle before descending the stairs.

The opening closed as soon as I exited the circle, and the statues of the gods began returning to their original places. It was a slow but steady process.

“What a strange sight,” I said. “Does this not happen to everyone who does the ritual...?”

“I have only seen it happen with you and Ferdinand. You both truly are out of the ordinary,” Hirschur said—though she didn’t look at all surprised. “Now, Lady Rozemyne—Ferdinand would not tell me what he found in there, but I trust that you will tell me everything.”

It seemed that only the person who performed the prayer could ascend the shrine, so, after watching Ferdinand do the ritual, Hirschur had only been able to wait and stew. To make matters worse for her, he had remained completely silent about what he had seen.

Hirschur was peering down at me, her purple eyes alive with excitement, but I returned a harsh stare. “Do you think I would just go and tell you when *Ferdinand* determined it best not to?” I said. “I will consult him first before doing anything.”

Looks like it's time to put my disappearing ink to use. To think I'd need it on my very first day of class, though... Isn't that a bit much?

Hirschur looked at me, shook her head, and then muttered in disappointment. “Ferdinand was always stubborn about the strangest things...”

Music and Everyone's Rituals

"Lady Rozemyne, which gods granted you their divine protection?" Roderick asked when I returned to the auditorium, sounding excited. He was holding his diptych at the ready but, unfortunately for him, I wasn't quite sure if it was even big enough to write down all the names.

Not wanting to draw any unnecessary attention to myself, I waved away both Roderick and Philine, who had come away from her studies to take out her diptych as well. "Have you both memorized the prayer? Go perform your own ceremonies, then."

"I... I haven't yet," Roderick replied.

"Then focus on that. I, myself, will study for tomorrow's written lessons."

I couldn't leave until Rihyarda and my guard knights came to get me, so I returned to my studies while waiting for the others to finish. To be honest, I wanted to cast some spells—receiving divine protections apparently made them require less mana—but I could hardly go around firing off magic while everyone else was working hard trying to memorize the prayer. I would break their focus, at the very least.

"Memorized it," Wilfried announced. "Guess it's my turn."

"Do you have any rejuvenation potions?" I asked.

"Yeah."

Wilfried was the second to attempt his ritual, after me. As expected, he had memorized the text in no time at all, owing to his familiarity with the Mana Replenishment prayer. He went off with Hirschur, looking noticeably tense—and the sight of a second Ehrenfest student going to the Farthest Hall seemed to light a fire under those from the other duchies, who started working even more seriously than before.

"I did it, Rozemyne!" Wilfried exclaimed upon his return not much later, wearing a gleeful expression. He was approaching at a brisk walk, though I could tell that he wanted to break into a sprint. "I got the divine protections of *twelve* gods! Even Professor Hirschur was surprised."

"Did he just say *twelve* gods?" a female student whispered.

"That sure is a lot..." Ortwin said.

A stir ran through the gathered students. This news hadn't come as a surprise to me—Wilfried had six elements, and, unlike Angelica, he hadn't been at risk of getting all the gods' names wrong—but twelve was evidently enough for people to be taken aback.

“How about you, Rozemyne? You must have gotten a lot of subordinates too, right?”

Yeeeah... I can hardly say that I got, like, forty. I'm just going to keep quiet.

There was no need for me to depress Wilfried when he was so excited, nor was there any need for me to make the students drastically more shocked than they were already. Instead, I decided to take a page from Angelica's book. I placed a hand on my cheek and gave an angelic smile.

“I did indeed receive protection from several subordinate gods, but is such a thing truly so rare?” I asked. “It is even written in the textbooks and reference documents that one will obtain such protections according to their deeds, so was this not to be expected all along?” The fact that we had both received so many made it seem nowhere near as rare as everyone was making out.

Hannelore gave a troubled smile. “It is normal to receive only one protection per element, Lady Rozemyne. Apprentice knights and Dunkelfelger students may receive several from the Fire subordinates, but, of course, Lord Wilfried does not specialize in combat. I would consider him receiving so many protections to be both rare and rather wonderful.”

So a lot of Dunkelfelger students receive divine protection from fighting-type subordinates... Yeah, that makes sense.

In true Dunkelfelger fashion, even Clarissa, a scholar, was said to be a deadly fighter. Maybe Hannelore would get protection from several fighting-types too.

“Is anyone else ready?” Gundolf called.

Ortwin paused for a moment, then said, “I am.”

“Hirschur, let's switch. I should be the one to escort Ortwin.”

And so, Ortwin made his way to the Farthest Hall with Gundolf, an unmistakable glint in his eye. The news that Wilfried and I had both received protections from several subordinates had made him especially confident... but he returned looking disappointed. He had only gotten one protection for each element he possessed.

“I only got one of each...” Ortwin said—and he wasn't alone. Most others also ended the ritual with no more protections than they had elements. In other words, despite my initial suspicions, receiving more than one per element truly was rare.

Soon enough, Hannelore returned from her own ritual, looking especially baffled.

“Did you not get the divine protections of any subordinate gods, Lady Hannelore?” I asked.

“No, I did. I received them from... Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time and Angriff the God of War.”

“That sounds wonderful—so why do you look so troubled?”

Hannelore glanced all around us, her two pink pigtails swaying from side to side as she anxiously looked at everyone watching her. “I... I am glad, of course. But... I simply do not understand why I obtained them. I do not know what I could have done to warrant their attention.”

She then exited the room, seeming truly confused.

“Lord Wilfried, Lady Rozemyne, if you would excuse me...” said an archnoble with a light-blue cape, indicating that he was from Frenbeltag.

Once the archnoble was gone, only Ehrenfest students remained. As laynobles and mednobles, they had refrained from attempting the ritual sooner out of concern of overstepping the boundaries of their status. One by one and in order of social rank, they made their way to the Farthest Hall—and, like the others, they returned having obtained only as many protections as they had elements.

“This leaves just Roderick and Philine,” I said. “Go ahead, Roderick.”

“I would rather go second so that I can see what Philine gets.”

“I will go first, then,” Philine said, standing up. She was gripping the rejuvenation potion dangling from her hip with an expression full of worry.

“You will be fine as long as you put your heart into the prayer,” I said.

She nodded, and we watched as she went to perform the ritual. It wasn’t long before she returned, racing back to us with rosy cheeks and a look of scarcely contained joy.

“Lady Rozemyne, I received a new element!” she exclaimed, her grass-green eyes sparkling with delight. “Wind! Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom granted me her divine protection! Praise be to the gods!” She then struck the prayer pose, indicating how much visiting the temple almost every day was influencing her.

I smiled in response, but everyone else was staring at her in shock. “What?!” cried good ol’ Katinka. “You got an element you didn’t have an affinity for?!”

“How did you do it, Philine?!” Roderick asked, standing up from his chair with a clatter.

“I do not know how or why it happened. I just used a rejuvenation potion to completely fill the circle with mana, as Lady Rozemyne instructed, and prayed.”

Our students weren't the only ones excited to hear Philine's unexpected report—Gundolf, our supervisor, leaned closer with bright eyes. "I should very much like to hear the details," he said. "Philine, was it? Are you a laynoble? I suppose you only had one affinity to begin with, then, correct? Tell me, what element was it?"

Philine could only blink at this sudden barrage of questions, while Roderick looked on in frustration, wanting to ask his own questions before doing the ritual himself. Gundolf seemed to notice this, but he was too interested in the current situation to care; instead, he pointed toward the Farthest Hall and said, "You there. Boy. Go do your ritual already."

Having no choice but to obey, Roderick started toward the Farthest Hall—though he continuously turned back to us as he went, as if wanting to ask something. Meanwhile, Gundolf returned to questioning Philine, all the while wearing the gentle smile of a kindly grandfather.

"So? Your affinity?" he asked.

"E-Earth."

"So you now have Wind as well. Hm, hm... Mestionora often focuses her attention on those who carry out intellectual work. Tell me, what manner of work have you been doing, exactly?"

It seemed that, while Drewanchel was brimming with intellectual pursuits, few of its students actually received Mestionora's divine protection. Gundolf evidently wanted to change this and ensure that more of the duchy's students received protection from Wind, in the same way that those from Dunkelfelger often received protection from Fire.

"Professor Gundolf," I said, "I understand how you feel, but please limit your questioning to that. We will need to go back to our dormitory when Roderick returns." It felt as though he would continue all day otherwise.

Philine gave a relieved sigh, then attempted to answer the many questions thrust upon her. "In regard to intellectual pursuits, I suppose one could count the stories I have been gathering for Lady Rozemyne. I may have been granted this protection as a result of studying as hard as I could to make modern translations—or maybe it was because of my time spent helping Lord Ferdinand in the temple."

Gundolf nodded along. After hearing Philine lay everything out like that, I came to realize just how hard she had been working.

"There are some in Drewanchel who are gathering and writing stories for Lady Rozemyne to purchase, and there are more studious ones among them as well..." Gundolf mused aloud. Intellectual pursuits on that level were common in Drewanchel, and nothing that Philine had said seemed to stand out to him. He clearly wanted to

pinpoint what exactly had gotten her her protection, but before he could question her any further, Roderick reappeared.

"I am done, Lady Rozemyne," he said. There was a smile on his face, but his eyes were wandering in a way that was somehow suspicious. He didn't attempt to engage with the conversation about Philine's new element like before—in fact, he actually looked to be inching away from us.

"Roderick, did something happen?" I asked. "You didn't fail the ritual, did you?"

All eyes fell on him, at which point he frantically shook his head. "No, no! It was a success!" He then looked at us all, seeming even more troubled than before. "In fact, it was *too much* of a success... For some reason, I got protection from every element."

"From every element?" I repeated, moderately surprised. "Wow, that really is something. Good work, Roderick."

"You obtained all elements through the divine protection of the subordinate gods?!" Gundolf exclaimed. He sounded a lot more shocked than I, which was probably to be expected, considering that he actually had common sense. "To think that such a thing is even possible..."

"Is that rare?" I asked.

"This is my first time hearing of someone becoming an omni-elemental through the ritual to receive divine protections."

Roderick obtaining new elements hadn't sounded that strange to me—especially when Philine had gotten one just a moment before—but someone becoming an "omni-elemental" like this was, as it turned out, simply impossible.

"But why?" Gundolf mumbled. "What must one do to make this happen...?" He looked straight at Roderick, who then fumbled his way through an answer.

"I, uh... I personally have no idea. I just channeled mana into the circle, and, um... all the elemental symbols began to shine. It was as though I were omni-elemental to begin with..."

Roderick had possessed Earth and Wind since his baptism ceremony, and the pillars of light that had shot up from those had reached the highest, while the light from the other elements had only stood half as tall. He was omni-elemental, but it seemed that his new affinities weren't particularly strong.

"And this was not the case at your baptism?" Gundolf asked.

"No, sir. I was told that I only had affinities for Wind and Earth."

"Has anything of significance changed since then?"

"I... don't know."

"There must be something. I cannot see why someone with two elements would become omni-elemental otherwise."

“It really is nonsensical that I, of all people, obtained these elements, but I truly do not know why it happened...” Roderick said, lowering his eyes in the face of Gundolf’s continued intensity.

I shook my head. “Roderick, you should not disparage yourself. It is disrespectful to the gods who gave you their protection.” I then turned my attention to Gundolf, resolved to keep him from troubling Roderick any further, as was my duty as his lady. “Obtaining the protection of every element is something to be celebrated, is it not? Perhaps you should be congratulating rather than interrogating Roderick. I understand your interest in such a rare occurrence, but your current approach will not produce any results. Please leave your questioning at that for today.”

“I suppose you are correct, Lady Rozemyne...” Gundolf said, letting out a sigh and allowing his shoulders to relax. He then congratulated Roderick and Philine on their new elements.

“Furthermore,” I continued, “while this is a rare event, these protections only make one’s mana easier to use; they do not change one’s life in any meaningful way, and they may be taken away if one grows complacent or arrogant. Roderick, Philine—consider this a sign that your efforts have been recognized. Now, shall we return to the dormitory to study for tomorrow’s written lessons?”

“Yes, Lady Rozemyne,” Roderick said, nodding with a brighter expression than before. But just as I was beginning to think we had wrapped things up nicely, Hirschur returned from cleaning the Farthest Hall and fixed me with a glare.

“Lady Rozemyne, I would not like for something this extraordinary to be passed over so easily.”

“Is that so, Professor Hirschur?”

“Although this does warrant celebration, it is also potentially disastrous. If news spreads that a student with only two elements became omni-elemental through divine protections, then the Royal Academy will be thrown into some degree of chaos. As such—everyone, keep this to yourselves.”

Judging by the excitement we had seen from Gundolf and the students who hadn’t received more protections than they had elements, I could absolutely see Roderick becoming an omni-elemental causing a panic. Thankfully, we were all from Ehrenfest, so it was just a matter of swearing a vow of secrecy.

“We shall carry out our own research on obtaining new elements, and, as we still wish to hear more about what happened, I will join you for dinner tomorrow.”

“Understood.”

It’s kind of annoying that we can’t just say, “You got more elements? Awesome!” and leave it at that. Sigh...

Even after returning to the dormitory, we needed to stay quiet about Roderick getting new elements—much to his disappointment. He looked especially frustrated over dinner, when everyone was exuberantly discussing Wilfried getting the divine protection of multiple subordinates and Philine receiving a new element. I could tell that he was dying to brag as well.

The next day, everyone passed their written lessons for the shared course, then I started preparing for music class in the afternoon. Rosina was helping me, since I expected the music professors to request another new song—and even if they didn't, it seemed a good idea to have one in reserve.

“Now, this is the song that you must play this year,” the professor said once we had all arrived at class. Once again, we were being asked to play a song chosen for us and a song of our choice. I looked at the former and slowly exhaled.

This is nostalgic. I first played that song almost two years ago. Though, wait... How high of a bar did Ferdinand set for me? He kept making me practice with Rosina, and not once did he praise me or say that I could stop. Do both of my music teachers have hearts of stone, perhaps?

I started to practice, and it was then that I heard an Ahrensbach archnoble begin to play a familiar tune. I hadn't realized it right away due to how it was arranged, but it was the song that I had given to Ferdinand.

That was... a love song for Geduldh, I think? It must have become popular in Ahrensbach after Ferdinand's winter debut. I've got no doubts that a ton of people asked him to play a new song—and given that he wouldn't really have been able to turn down such requests in Ahrensbach, he probably ended up playing it over and over again.

I strained my ears, trying to focus on the arrangement, only to have the Ahrensbach archnoble playing it shoot me something of a victorious smile. “This is a new Ahrensbach song composed by Lord Ferdinand,” she said. “It does not belong to you nor to Ehrenfest, Lady Rozemyne.”

Umm... I composed it. Ferdinand just arranged it, but... okay, whatever.

I decided to hold my tongue. Ferdinand was surely doing everything in his power to secure more allies, and there was no reason for me to interfere with that.

“I am truly fond of the songs that Lord Ferdinand composes,” I said. “If you are playing one, then I would very much love to hear it. It can only be heard in Ahrensbach otherwise, no?”

“I am still practicing it, but if that will do...” The girl sighed,

evidently relieved that I had accepted the song as Ahrensbach's, then readied her harspiel and started to sing.

Hmm... This isn't a love song. It's a wistful piece about one's hometown.

It was a song about one's Geduldh, following her departure after the sweet moons of winter. I could see why it might be interpreted as romantic, and those who sang it in Ahrensbach no doubt assumed that Ferdinand was singing about his fiancée, who had returned to the Royal Academy... but after hearing his parting words and promise, I understood it as a song of nostalgia.

Though I guess he wouldn't want me to point this out, right?

I could already imagine Detlinde running to Ferdinand in tears and screaming, "You deceived me!" Of course, Ferdinand would then give a cool response like "You only deceived yourself." It wasn't a situation where he would come out on top, though. I wanted Detlinde to be as pleased as possible so that she would treat Ferdinand as well as possible in turn.

At the very least, I need to keep quiet until after the Starbinding Ceremony, once he's been officially married into Ahrensbach!

Ferdinand was an outsider from a bottom-ranking middle duchy, and for as long as his marriage had yet to take place, the treatment he received was entirely up to Detlinde, Georgine, and so on. I wanted to do all that I could to make his stay as comfortable as possible.

The moment I steeled my resolve, however, Wilfried joined me in listening to the song. He seemed to recognize the hook, and his expression quickly became one of confusion.

"Uncle may have played this song first, but Roze—"

I cut Wilfried off with a firm thump on the shoulder and a broad smile. My silent cry for him to "shut up, shut up, shut up" appeared to have gotten through to him, as he responded with a quiet nod.

Soon enough, the Ahrensbach girl finished her performance.

"I am so glad to have had this opportunity to hear a song by Ferdinand," I said. "Please do tell Ferdinand that he has composed yet another wonderful piece. Furthermore, should Ferdinand make any more new songs, I would love to hear them as well."

I gave the girl my thanks, repeating "Ferdinand" as many times and as clearly as I was able. My aim was to make it apparent to everyone that he had made the song—although it made me feel very much like a sports announcer.

Hands together for Ferdinand, ladies and gentlemen! That was his work, through and through! Let's all ensure his days are spent peacefully!

I wanted to go around shilling him to every Ahrensbach noble—though I also understood that he wouldn't much appreciate it.

As I was lost in my thoughts, the Ahrensbach girl gave me a

mischievous smile. “Lady Rozemyne, will you be playing any new songs this year? You *are* able to make them without your instructor, Lord Ferdinand, aren’t you? I am ever so eager to hear what you have written.”

Her taunting left me no choice; I needed to show everyone that Ehrenfest could do just fine even without Ferdinand.

Plus, I need to pass all of my classes the first time around. Ferdinand, I can see exactly why people call you the Lord of Evil!

“I am honored that you look forward to my songs so much,” I said with a smile. “I will gladly use this opportunity to play one that I composed myself.”

With that, I went over to the professor and asked to be graded. I took my seat, readied my harspiel, took in a slow breath... and then began to play. This year’s assigned piece was technically a love song—one that students our age apparently needed to know for when we went around searching for an escort. That had nothing to do with me, though, as I was already engaged.

I played the song without incident, having already learned it two years ago, then moved on to the song of my own choice. It was a piece dedicated to Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind—a wish to protect those dear to the singer’s heart. In my case, these special people were Ferdinand, who had gone to Ahrensbach, and the children who were losing their families in the purge.

As I sang and played the harspiel, I started to feel my mana slipping through my fingers. The next thing I knew, it was overflowing and shining as it turned into a blessing. It was yellow, the divine color of Schutzaria.

Surprised to be experiencing a repeat of my debut, I tried to stop the flow of my mana, but...

What? It... won’t stop?

For some reason, the flow of my mana wasn’t listening to me. I started to panic, but I couldn’t risk failing any of my classes, so I continued to play nonetheless. The blessing didn’t stop until the very end of the song.

There were two key factors that stood out to me here: I hadn’t been able to stop my mana, much like before, and nowhere near as much had seemed to be expended.

Wait... could this be because of my ritual yesterday?!

Everyone was watching me in a daze, our professor included. I wanted nothing more than for the earth to swallow me whole.

“Lady Rozemyne,” our professor said, “what in the world was that...?”

“That was, um... the Goddess of Wind’s blessing...” I replied. “It seems that yesterday’s ritual made it a little easier for my blessings to

overflow. Ohohoho..."

Of course, my half-hearted chuckle wasn't enough to smooth things over.

This wasn't good. I would need to figure out how to control my mana all over again, else I ran the risk of sending out even more blessings than before. It hadn't even occurred to me that the ritual might have such an effect. I despaired, conscious that I didn't even have a guardian to help me.

What should I do at a time like this, Ferdinand?!

After passing music class, I sent Rihyarda an ordonnanz asking her to come fetch me, then fled back to the dormitory.

"Rihyarda, what can I do?!" I cried. "I want to be able to control my mana like before, but I just can't anymore! I think the divine protections ritual is to blame..."

"I'm truly sorry, but I know of no solution to this problem," Rihyarda replied, wearing a thoroughly troubled expression. "In my generation, we did not obtain our schtappes until *after* performing that ritual..."

It seemed that there had actually been a reason why the students of past generations had needed to wait until their graduations to get their schtappes. I cradled my head, having no idea how to properly control the flow of my mana or stop my blessings.

"Those in Lord Ferdinand's generation obtained their schtappes in their third year," Rihyarda continued, "but, again, this occurred after the divine protections ritual. They would not have experienced any significant changes in their divine protections or mana efficiency after obtaining their schtappes."

In other words, not even Ferdinand would be able to advise me in this situation. The very thought made me teary-eyed.

Gaaah! Who arbitrarily decided that we should obtain our schtappes first?! Take me back to the old way of doing things!

"Professor Hirschur is going to be here tonight, so perhaps you could consult her?" Rihyarda suggested.

"...I'll do just that."

Discussing Divine Protections with Hirschur

Come dinnertime, Hirschur arrived at the dormitory. She appeared to have a headache, but she wasn't the only one.

"Professor, the ritual yesterday has made my mana so much harder to control," I said. "I don't feel any being spent when I use it, and I couldn't stop myself from giving a blessing during music class. What should I do?"

"I obviously do not have an answer. Blessings cause no harm to anyone, so perhaps you can simply allow them to happen. If you wish for any further advice, consult Ferdinand." Hirschur evidently had zero interest in working through problems centered around having too much mana. "Lord Wilfried, might we speak after dinner?" she said, swiftly moving the conversation along.

"Of course," he replied. "I will have my attendants prepare a room so that anything we discuss remains confidential. We can move there after eating."

Eating with one's supervisor was a completely normal occurrence in other duchies—but here in the Ehrenfest Dormitory, it was exceptionally rare. The students all eyed Hirschur, wondering what had happened to warrant her appearance.

Hirschur didn't even touch on what the third-years had done during the divine protections ritual; instead, she praised everyone for passing a second day of classes on the first go.

"Ehrenfest truly is spectacular when it comes to written lessons," she said. "Once again, everyone has passed on the first day. Your grades are rising by the year, and the professors are rather impressed."

Now that more people were learning the Rozemyne Mana Compression Method, our practical grades were steadily rising too.

Hirschur continued, "I thought that Ehrenfest would start doing far worse in practical lessons once Angelica, Cornelius, and Hartmut graduated, but Leonore, Matthias, and Laurenz are all showing continual improvement, and the three archduke candidates are all scoring excellently. I look forward to another successful year."

We students had reached a point where we no longer saw our grades as accomplishments—we would pass one of our classes and then immediately move on to the next. That was why third-party praise was so important; hearing that the professors were seeing

Ehrenfest in a better light and that our duchy was improving as a whole meant a lot.

“It is because Ferdinand demands so much,” I said. “I was once again tasked with ensuring that we pass all of our classes on the first day.”

Not to mention, there were many students who risked growing mentally unstable without a goal to focus on. We hadn’t received any more news about the purge, but we still didn’t intend to reveal the situation to Hirschur anytime soon.

Hirschur was positively delighted with the food she was served—although the rest of us were entirely used to it by now. We were gradually selling more and more recipes during the yearly Archduke Conference, but no other duchies had produced their own spins on them just yet. Such was to be expected; recreating the meals as per the recipes was already challenging enough.

“It was several years before even my own chefs started to create new dishes instead of sticking to preexisting recipes,” I said. “I expect it will only be a matter of time, though.”

I was most interested in seeing how faithfully other duchies would follow the steps that went against the common sense of this world, like with making broth and such. Each duchy would then need to begin the trial-and-error process of adding local ingredients and sampling the results to see what best suited its people’s tastes.

And, in the meantime, we need to make new variations ourselves.

“Lady Rozemyne, what dessert is this?” Hirschur asked.

“A sweet known as ‘mousse’ in Ehrenfest,” I replied. It was a high-effort dessert composed of yogurt mousse sandwiched between two slices of sponge cake. Incidentally, we were giving away the recipe for this very dessert as our reward this year. We were free to start spreading it, since the Othmar Company had now begun to make gelatin.

I’ll do my best to make gelatin popular, especially since Freida is working so hard in the Italian restaurant.

Freida may have been giving me gelatin so that I could introduce other nobles to its many wonders, but this wasn’t a bribe; rather, I just wanted more tasty foods to be popular. I already knew from experience that jiggly desserts like jelly and caramel custard weren’t very well received, which was why I was planning to combine the mousse with last year’s reward and create fallold mousse tarts.

I wanted to see how the Sovereign nobles would respond to this dessert, which was why we had specially prepared some to be served. The plan was to bring some to small tea parties with royals, but not to any larger gatherings; the chefs still struggled to make sponge cake, and there were still occasions when their efforts ended in failure.

“I thought the mouthfeel might seem unusual, so I flavored it with honey and yogurt to make it taste a bit more familiar. How is it?” I asked. The sour taste of the yogurt eased the sweetness of the honey mousse—and since the mousse was between two pieces of sponge cake, I was sure that the texture wouldn’t be too off-putting.

“The texture certainly is unique,” Hirschur replied. “It really does melt in the mouth—and, I must say, it is quite delicious.”

“Would it be safe to serve to the royal family?”

“You would do well to make it look a little fancier, but the flavor will suffice.”

Having received the go-ahead from Hirschur, I decided to think about how to make the dessert look better. Decorating it with fallold or rutreb jam would allow us to mix in red and white—very fitting for a winter sweet.

After dessert, which had doubled as a test run for our future tea parties, we moved elsewhere with Hirschur. We archduke candidates had a duty to be present for the discussion that was about to follow, as we had to report back to the archduke. Also joining us were Philine and Roderick, whose acquisition of new elements had pretty much necessitated this meeting in the first place.

Six seats were prepared, and, once the attendants had served us our tea, Hirschur motioned for them and the guard knights to step back. “I shan’t go so far as to clear the room, but we will be using sound-blocking magic tools,” she said. “Lady Rozemyne, activate this one, if you would.”

“What? Me?” I could only blink in surprise as Hirschur handed me an area-of-effect version of the tool in question. Under normal circumstances, the onus to activate it would have been on her, considering that she had brought it.

“You have so much mana that merely playing a song in class caused you to release a blessing. That could not have happened if you had so little mana that you were on the verge of death.”

She had a point, so I channeled mana into the sound-blocking tool and then set it down as instructed. It consumed much less mana than expected; in fact, it barely seemed to consume any at all.

This is so similar to after my first jureve, when I ended up losing fine control of my mana. Maybe it actually would have been best for me to return for the Dedication Ritual this year... I could have used that opportunity to expend some of my mana and helped in the fight against the Lord of Winter.

I sighed and returned to my seat, at which point Hirschur looked over us all. “Now then, let us begin by sharing what we know,” she said. “Lady Charlotte is here, though she did not participate in the rituals to acquire one’s divine protections. Furthermore, while I am

aware that you have spoken with Gundolf about the incident, I was by the shrine and thus could not hear your conversation.”

Hirschur went on to tell Charlotte what had occurred yesterday—though I noticed that she didn’t mention my ritual. Philine’s and Roderick’s circumstances were already considered unusual, so I was sure that mine would be absolutely bizarre. I glanced at Hirschur, but it seemed that she wasn’t going to mention my ritual at all.

“Gundolf spoke with you after Philine returned to the auditorium with more elements,” Hirschur said. “Tell me, what did you discuss?”

We collectively started to recount the conversation, working together to fill in the gaps in one another’s memories. Once we were done, Charlotte tilted her head at us in confusion.

“The purpose of the ritual is to obtain divine protection from the gods, correct? I struggle to see why receiving the protection of various subordinates is so surprising...”

We were completely on the same wavelength. Aside from Roderick becoming omni-elemental, none of what had happened seemed that odd to me.

Hirschur sighed. “Allow me to explain what things are like for a normal noble—that is, not a student from Dunkelfelger or an apprentice knight expected to earn protections from the fighting-centric subordinates. They will obtain the protection of the primary god of whatever elements they have and nothing more. Unless there is some dormitory supervisor purposefully holding their tongue, no students have obtained the divine protection of subordinates not involved in warfare for over a decade.”

Everyone had, of course, been calling what happened a rare occurrence—but only now did it occur to me just how rare it was. We could only blink at each other and exchange glances as Hirschur continued.

“In the past, the majority of those who received the divine protection of multiple subordinates were the archduke candidates or members of the royal family. It was extremely rare for laynobles and mednobles to receive any at all; in fact, one has to go back a hundred years or more to find any such examples.”

“So, in short... Philine and Roderick are both extraordinary,” I concluded.

Hirschur fixed me with a stern glare. “I am asking that you understand the abnormality of this situation, Lady Rozemyne.”

I nodded in response. Although the reason for these events was still very much beyond me, I recognized that they were a bit weird. I also understood that there was a “dormitory supervisor purposefully holding their tongue” right in front of me.

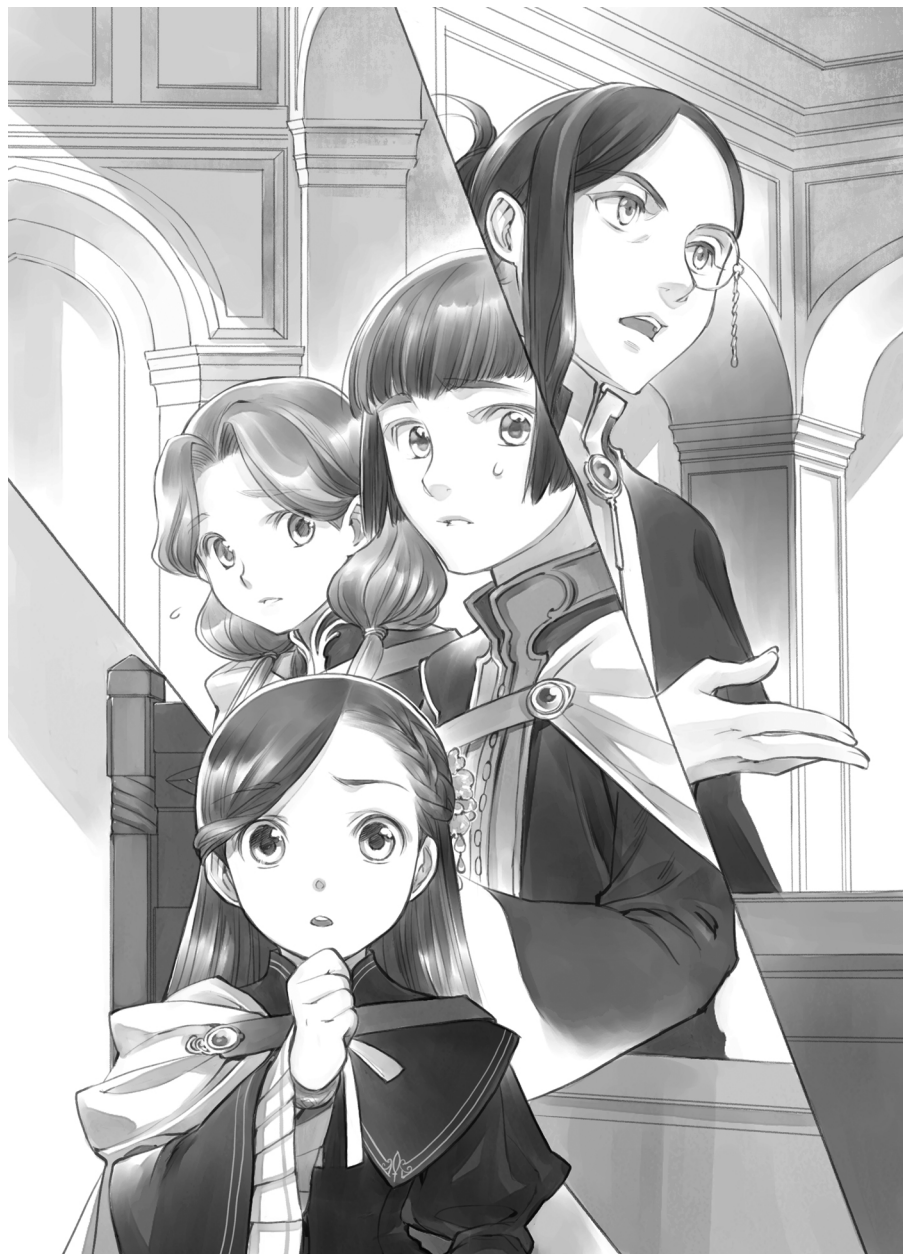
“Apprentice knights and students from Dunkelfelger often receive

divine protection from the fighting-type subordinates, but we do not know why this is the case,” Hirschur went on. “Anyone else receiving the protection of subordinates is exceptionally rare—though not entirely unprecedented. It is for this reason that Lord Wilfried received a few words of surprise and admiration but nothing more.”

That much made sense. Hirschur even noted that Hannelore had received a similar reaction.

“Philine, however, is another matter entirely. She is a laynoble who did not have an affinity for Wind, did not receive Schutzaria’s protection, and obtained a new element solely from the divine protection of the Goddess of Wisdom. One would struggle to find a similar case in recent history—and that is to say nothing of the now omni-elemental Roderick.”

Philine’s and Roderick’s expressions clouded. They had just been happy to have received more elements; I couldn’t imagine that they had expected this to become such a major incident.



“Professor Hirschur, what about me?” I asked, conscious that I had received the divine protection of so many more subordinates and even caused the shrine’s statues to move. I still didn’t know how rare that was.

Hirschur merely waved away my question. “This is not the first time you have done something incomprehensibly bizarre, and it surely will not be the last. Your circumstances are not worth discussing.”

“Yes, they are!” Wilfried suddenly cried out. “We can’t ignore her when she’s the one most likely to cause problems!” He sounded kind of desperate, since he was always flung around the most when I did something strange at the Royal Academy.

Again, Hirschur responded with a dismissive wave, this time offering the plain smile of someone who had completely given up. “Our best option is to consult Ferdinand and have the monsters solve things between themselves. He is more likely to understand Lady Rozemyne’s situation than anyone else—and dealing with her is outside of my scope in the first place.”

“But you’re Ehrenfest’s dormitory supervisor!” I exclaimed. “Don’t say I’m out of your scope! At least *try* to help!”

“I refuse,” Hirschur said, broadening her smile. “My time with Ferdinand taught me that attempting to help with these matters only makes one look a fool. To honor his request for my aid, Lady Rozemyne, I will assist you in concealing matters such as this and throw you a bone in class... but you will need to solve the actual problems on your own.”

So... Ferdinand is the reason that Professor Hirschur’s abandoning me?! He’s so mean!

Despite my continued wails, Hirschur pushed onward. “That said, while Lady Rozemyne is not my problem—we have known her to be bizarre from the very beginning—the fact that she has begun to influence those around her very much is.” Her gaze shifted to Philine and Roderick. “Yesterday, eight Ehrenfest students performed the divine protections ritual. Four passed without incident, acquiring as many protections as they have elements. The four of you, in contrast, had some very unusual results. Do you not see the unifying factor here?”

I racked my brain, trying to figure out what she meant. We weren’t all of the same status or gender; what, then, did we have in common?

“I... don’t know,” Wilfried eventually said. “Is there anything that connects us other than the fact we are all from Ehrenfest?”

“Sitting before me are Lady Rozemyne, her fiancé, and her retainers,” Hirschur said. “*She* is your unifying factor.”

Wilfried clapped his hands together and shouted, “Of course! You’re completely right!” He looked as satisfied as someone who had just received the answer to an especially tricky puzzle.

“I’d rather you not suddenly blame all this on me!” I declared, overwhelmed with the urge to deny absolutely everything. But nobody supported my righteous fury. Even Philine and Charlotte appeared to have been convinced by Hirschur’s awful—and completely unfounded—theory.

That’s right! Theory!

“Any time that something unexpected occurs in Ehrenfest, one can generally assume that Lady Rozemyne is responsible. Thus, I have the utmost confidence here.”

“Ngh...!” I groaned, unable to protest.

Hirschur gave me a serious look. “I believe that, for you all to have obtained so many divine protections, you must be doing something that other nobles are not. Do you have any idea what that might be?”

“Well... yes,” I replied.

“You do?!” Wilfried exclaimed. He and everyone else were suddenly leaning forward, their eyes wide.

“Huh? Shouldn’t it be obvious to everyone but Charlotte? I mentioned it while we were in the auditorium. To be honest, I don’t understand why neither you nor Professor Gundolf can figure it out yourselves. It’s outright written in the textbooks.”

“Do elaborate,” Hirschur prompted, now leaning even closer.

I reflexively leaned away from her and said, “It’s prayer. As the High Bishop, I pray and offer my mana to the gods on a daily basis. And, as my retainers, Philine and Roderick regularly visit the temple and similarly offer their prayers. Hartmut and my other retainers have also started donating their mana even without meaning to, as they have been touching the divine instruments in an attempt to learn how to make them.”

Ferdinand had said that it required too much mana to be useful in a fight, but Hartmut and Cornelius could now make Ewigeliebe’s sword. Damuel didn’t even have enough mana to maintain its shape, which had made him rather depressed.

“I see that Ehrenfest’s temple has changed greatly in my absence...” Hirschur said. “That is nothing like how I remember it.”

“I’ve been putting a lot of work into it,” I replied, puffing out my chest. “Wilfried and Charlotte have similarly been traveling throughout the Central District, performing ceremonies for Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival—which, of course, involves praying. Not to mention, in Ehrenfest, archduke candidates pray to the gods when supplying mana to the foundation. Is that not commonplace?”

“I suppose you did say something like that...”

“It’s written in both our textbooks and the bible that praying to the gods is important for earning divine protections. In my opinion, if the nobles of other duchies revile the temple and refuse to pray sincerely, then it is only natural that they would not receive many.”

Angelica had failed to receive divine protection from a primary god after failing to remember their name, and with this in mind, it seemed only natural that those who did not pray sincerely would be given only the bare minimum.

“I see we were mistaken in our understanding of the text,” Hirschur said with a tired sigh. “The instructions to pray to the gods are not just referring to the ritual itself; they are a custom that we need to adopt into our daily lives.”

“Indeed. The gods who granted me their divine protection were those to whom I already prayed,” I said, placing a hand on my cheek. “Perhaps this theory would receive more weight if you were to ask Lady Hannelore whether she prays often to Dregarnuhr and Angriff, or Dunkelfelger students and the apprentice knights whether they usually pray before battle.”

“I shall consult those from Dunkelfelger, as they consistently obtain multiple divine protections,” Hirschur said; then her face stiffened. “This explains what happened with Lord Wilfried, and also with Philine, who has performed intellectual pursuits in the house of the gods and frequently prayed for Mestionora’s protection. However, it does not explain Roderick becoming omni-elemental. Do you have any theories?”

“I have one,” Roderick said. His fists were clenched and his eyes downcast. “However, I cannot tell whether I am allowed to say it. I will need to consult the aub before I can answer.”

“And the fact that you did not consult him yesterday means he is busy, I assume?” Hirschur asked, looking from me to Wilfried to Charlotte. Indeed, Sylvester was no doubt running himself ragged dealing with the purge and the decided punishments—especially now that Ferdinand, his right-hand man, was gone.

“Every aub is busy during winter socializing,” I said.

“Well, when he has a little more time, I should very much like to speak with him,” Hirschur replied. I always got the impression she was avoiding the archduke, so hearing that surprised me.

“What do you want to talk to him about?” I asked.

Hirschur didn’t respond; instead, she turned to Wilfried. “Tell me, what happens when one obtains divine protection?”

“Magic requires less mana, and spells of that element become easier to cast.”

“Correct. Now then, Philine—what happens when you have more

usable mana?"

"You can cast larger spells or, alternatively, use spells for longer."

"Correct," Hirschur replied, then looked at me. "Lady Rozemyne, you have introduced a new mana compression method, which has very clearly led to half of our dormitory's students increasing their mana capacities more efficiently than the students of other duchies. And now, this year, we have perhaps discovered how one can secure more divine protections. If what you say is true, then Ehrenfest students—and Ehrenfest students alone—can expect to earn multiple protections going forward."

Mana compression increased one's capacity, while divine protections increased one's efficiency. If we handled this well, then we would be able to perform several times more magic than before.

"This is going to be a revolutionary... *rediscovery* for Yurgenschmidt. I suggest that Ehrenfest present these findings during the Interduchy Tournament as its research for this year."

"Is it not common practice to hide methods that can improve one's mana and the like?" I asked.

"It is—and under normal circumstances, I would recommend just that. However"—there was a sudden glint in her purple eyes—"do you know how the other duchies view Ehrenfest right now?"

We detailed everything we had learned from the reports of the Archduke Conference.

"I see the aub is not one to shy away from inconvenient truths..." Hirschur muttered. "To be frank, there are few who see Ehrenfest positively. We suffered very little in the civil war due to remaining neutral, we are introducing one trend after another, and we are now biting into the territory of top-ranking duchies. On top of all that, there are many terrible rumors surrounding Aub Ehrenfest. Of course, this distaste has only become more drastic as our grades have risen."

As it turned out, the state of affairs was even harsher than the Archduke Conference had revealed.

Hirschur continued, "If we were to monopolize not just mana but divine protection as well, then those in the Sovereignty, where the mana shortage is being felt all too keenly, would not be pleased. Do you grasp my meaning? We are in a position where the ideal course of action is to publicize our findings and ease the frustrations of others, are we not? Our knowledge will be perceived as a gift to the Sovereignty."

"This certainly is something for the aub to decide," I said.

"Precisely—and you would do well to discuss it thoroughly," Hirschur said, then heaved a sigh. "Lady Rozemyne, you are attracting much attention as Ferdinand's disciple."

It seemed that, in the Sovereignty, most thought that Ferdinand

was secretly pulling the strings of my sainthood. Even now that he was gone, they were very interested in finding out whether he had left me any valuable information.

“There are many eager to find out what you know,” Hirschur continued, “but you do not participate in socializing. Thus, you are still something of a mystery. I am summoned often and questioned to no end—in particular about your relationship with Ferdinand.”

Everyone present swallowed.

“Lady Eglantine has been elected as the new instructor of the archduke candidate course for one reason above all others: because she is closer to you than any other member of the royal family.”

“Really?”

“Now that she is married to Prince Anastasius, she is no longer of the Klassenberg archducal family. She is a member of royalty. I would advise that you take great care around her; she will not be able to refuse any orders from the king that are said to be for the sake of the country. I intend to aid you in hiding various matters, but I cannot help to solve any issues once they have occurred.”

Hirschur was clearly set on being as disengaged from these matters as possible. I immediately understood why the ever-doubtful Ferdinand placed so much trust in her.

“I suppose you should avoid the library as well... The new librarian, Hortensia, is the first wife of the Sovereign knight commander. He seems to harbor suspicions in regard to you and Ferdinand.”

Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander, had called Ferdinand a “seed of Adalgisa.” I envisioned the man’s sharp eyes glaring at me from behind Hortensia’s soft smile and instinctively clenched my fists.

Beginning the Archduke Candidate Course

Once our discussion with Hirschur was over, the room began to clear. I stayed put, however. I still wished to speak with Roderick, and, to that end, I took a sound-blocking magic tool from Rihyarda. Only once Roderick was gripping the tool did our conversation begin.

“Roderick, you said that you might know what caused you to become omni-elemental, correct?”

“I understood when Professor Hirschur said that we are all connected to you. It’s the name-swearing.” He brought a hand to his chest, and his eyes grew distant as he seemed to remember the ritual. “When I gave you my name, I was bound by your mana. I could tell in an instant that it could spare me—but that it could just as easily take my life as well. Thus, I imagine your mana had an influence on my divine protections ritual. You are... omni-elemental yourself, I expect?”

I nodded; Roderick already looked so confident in his deduction that I saw no reason to lie to him. “This certainly does seem to be because of me. I wonder... Does that mean those who gave their names to Ferdinand and Lady Georgine likewise gained elements through them?”

“Thinking back... I did notice that brewing became easier. It was only by the slightest amount, though—so slight that, at the time, I merely assumed that I was having a good day. I expect that knights such as Lord Eckhart feel the effects more keenly as they use the mana of their lord or lady to do battle.”

But now, receiving divine protections from the primary gods had reduced Roderick’s mana expenditure by a noticeable degree.

“Still, I would assume that those who gave their names to Lord Ferdinand and Lady Georgine were less affected, as they gave their names after the ritual,” Roderick continued. “Furthermore—and this is just my opinion—I do not think it wise to reveal that giving one’s name can lead to obtaining more elements.”

“And why is that?”

“Name-swearing is a ritual wherein one proves their loyalty by offering their life to another. I do not believe it should be done to seek more elements,” Roderick said, his voice almost a whisper. He had abandoned everything—even his family—to serve me; it made sense

that he didn't want his resolve to be wrongly interpreted as a self-centered attempt to secure more elements.

I nodded slowly. "I would not want to accept the life of someone who simply wants my elements."

"However, the children of the former Veronica faction are currently being forced to give their names to survive. That is not normal."

"Indeed..."

"And among those who must give their names to survive, there are surely some who would wish to give their name to you solely to increase their elements. I assume this is not something that you would appreciate."

I was set on accepting the names of the four people who had chosen me after careful consideration, but he was right—I didn't want to deal with anyone who was coming to me for elements.

"My greatest fear is that, if you publicize this information, the children of the former Veronica faction will earn even more ire from other nobles, and the cries for them to be deemed guilty by association will grow even louder. Having to swear one's name becomes less of a punishment when it provides the chance to earn new elements while serving the archducal family."

The majority of the former Veronica faction were laynobles and mednobles. Several of the mednobles might as well have been archnobles thanks to their Ahrensbach blood, but they only had one to three affinities. This name-swearing would allow them to have as many elements as the archducal family—and, upon swearing their names, they would also be in a position to learn my mana compression method. This surely wouldn't please other nobles.

"Even so, this is going to be difficult to hide with so many children offering their names at once," I said. "I will need to consult the aub. Roderick, the professors already know you have become omni-elemental but take care not to inform anyone else."

I continued to pass all of my written and practical lessons the first time around as the weekend drew nearer and nearer. Each time I went to the auditorium or the Small Hall, I would see other students point at me and murmur things to the effect of "I heard she performed a large-scale blessing while playing the harspiel..." and "It was a larger blessing than I've ever seen before!" So many people had witnessed my blessing that it was pointless for me to try to deny it; instead, my only choice was to wait patiently until they eventually stopped talking about it.

I wrote a letter to Clarissa requesting a meeting and sent a report to Ehrenfest to give Hirschur an opportunity for her discussion with

Sylvester. I also wrote a letter to Ferdinand, but I kept missing my chance to give it to Raimund, who was largely holed up in his dormitory.

Come the first Earthday, the first-years who had all obtained their schtappes hid away in their rooms, while the other students started going to the gathering spot to secure materials for their various classes. Normally, we would have started gathering soon after arriving at the dormitory, but the purge had understandably delayed those of us in our second and third years.

The quantity of herbs decreased considerably, so I went ahead and dumped some of my mana to replenish it—in part to prevent another unwanted blessing in the future.

And... that should do it.

Thus, time passed without incident, and the next week arrived. I would soon be attending the first class of my specialty courses, and with that thought in mind, I made my way to the dining hall for breakfast. Roderick was the only one waiting for me on the second floor; Theodore was not present.

“He must not have finished absorbing his Divine Will.”

“I am sure he will be out by the afternoon.”

This wasn’t much of a surprise; everyone absorbed their Divine Will at their own pace. As I peeked down the hallway leading to the boys’ rooms, I envisioned Theodore working hard, hoping to turn his schtappe into a weapon as soon as possible, and silently cheered him on.

After breakfast, everyone gathered to study in the common room. This would continue until all of our written lessons were over. The first- and second-years had managed to finish all of their classes in the first week, since they had so few to begin with, which meant they were this year’s fastest teams. Charlotte was especially relieved about this, as she felt she had now made up for her shortcomings last year.

Now, the third-years and above were in a tense battle to score the highest marks in their respective specialty courses. The attendant team was especially motivated.

I’ll do my best too!

“I see the archduke candidate course does not have its own specialty building...” I said. Knights, scholars, and attendants all got their own buildings, so why didn’t we? It was actually a little upsetting.

Rihyarda chuckled when she saw me purse my lips. “The central building is the specialty building for royals and archduke candidates. There is a classroom in a corner of the building for them. It was designed this way so that those with the most status will not have to

travel as far as other students.”

That worked in my favor; I would have been in trouble if our classroom were too far away. And so, I made my way to the room that had been indicated in the advancement ceremony.

“Now then—study well,” Rihyarda said.

“I do not expect any issues,” I replied. “I studied with Ferdinand, after all.”

“I’m not so confident...” Wilfried mumbled. “I couldn’t keep up with you and Uncle.” There was no helping that, though. He naturally wasn’t able to visit the temple every day, and his smaller mana quantity meant he was inevitably slower at dyeing feystones.

“But you still prepared, and you have so many divine protections now. I’m sure you will find class much easier than your studies.”

“Hopefully...”

I entered the classroom with Wilfried and immediately saw that, unlike the Small Hall, there were a number of rather low desks lined up. If our lessons with Ferdinand were anything to go by, this was probably so that we could peer down when making our practice box gardens.

Though they’re still a bit too tall for me...

I would probably need a stand or something. After a quick glance around the room, I noticed that there was already one at the desk closest to the professor’s podium. That was sure to be for me.

Of course someone as astute as Lady Eglantine would come prepared. Though I do feel a bit awkward about being the only one using a stand at their desk.

I sighed and looked around again. Our classes thus far had all been shared with archnobles, but there were only other archduke candidates here—and not very many, at that. Thinking about how alone we were going to be from now on made me feel very sad.

“Lady Hannelore. How do you do?”

“Lady Rozemyne. Lord Wilfried. How are you?”

I promptly made my way over to Hannelore. As I understood it, Hirschur had spoken to her about her divine protections over the weekend; I was curious to know exactly what she had said.

“I’m told that Professor Hirschur went to question Dunkelfelger, but, erm... how did you fare, Lady Hannelore? She tends to lose sight of everything else when her research is involved, so I was a little concerned.”

“She said that she wished to test if your theory was true, Lady Rozemyne. I was ever so curious about why I received divine protection from various subordinates, but the theory explained everything. I feel very relieved now,” Hannelore said happily.

“So you were praying on a daily basis?”

“Um, well... I kept thinking about how much I wanted to receive Dregarnuhr’s divine protection, and I prayed often while keeping the charms that Cordula gave me on my person at all times.” She pulled up her sleeve to reveal a bracelet-shaped charm just like the ones I was wearing. It was set with a somewhat larger than normal feystone marked with Dregarnuhr’s sigil.

“In that case, have you also been praying to Angriff on a daily basis?” I asked.

“As for him... Ah. I do not think I prayed to him often, but Dunkelfelger’s culture is to praise the art of war; we often sing and dance before ditter matches, and, upon emerging victorious, we hold ceremonies wherein we dedicate our mana to the fighting-type gods. After we won the Interduchy Tournament, both my brother and I offered up our mana. Given that my brother also received Angriff’s divine protection, it seems likely that the ritual is responsible.”

Singing and dancing before a match, huh? That sounds a lot like those hakas you see at rugby games. Well, makes sense to me.

That explained why Dunkelfelger alone received divine protection from the fighting-type subordinate gods. They prayed before and after ditter games and put so much soul into these acts of devotion, so it only made sense that their faith would be rewarded.

“We theorized that apprentice knights earn these divine protections because Professor Rauffen incorporates these traditions into the apprentice knight course. Those who participate earnestly receive them,” Hannelore continued. Those who spoke the prayers or sang war songs simply because they were being told to apparently didn’t receive any such protections. “Lord Wilfried must have received so many because he prays a tremendous amount each day.”

“Seems like having our archduke candidates travel around the duchy for Spring Prayer to help with the mana shortage was the right decision after all,” Wilfried said.

Hannelore nodded with a smile, then looked at me as if suddenly remembering something. “In that case... how many divine protections did you receive, Lady Rozemyne?” she asked, now coming across as a lot more timid. “You pray on a daily basis as the High Bishop, so it must have been an extraordinary number... And the ritual made your mana overflow to the point that you gave a blessing during music class, no?”

“W-Well, that’s...”

Every archduke candidate in the room was now watching me; they must have been listening in on our conversation. Even I understood that being stupidly honest and revealing the actual number here would just cause problems.

“The precise number is a secret,” I replied. “Because, um... it is

not something to be made so public.”

Hannelore looked around at everyone, nodded, and said, “So you received so many that you cannot even say.”

All of a sudden, everyone jumped and rushed to their seats. Eglantine, our professor, had entered with her many assistants. They were carrying large boxes.

I went to the front-row seat, where the stand was already in position. Wilfried was sitting some distance away, but, in a pleasant turn of events, Hannelore was right beside me.

“We’ve been put next to each other, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Indeed. It’s a fine day for learning.”

Eglantine, who was now standing behind the professor’s podium, was wearing her hair in a very complex style. She was also dressed in clothes that emphasized that, while she was our teacher, she was a royal first and foremost. Her black cape made her current position especially clear.

And she became a teacher to gather intelligence from me?

My heart sank a little as I recalled Hirschur’s words. It was sad enough that they wanted to probe me for information... but what was even sadder was that their suspicions were entirely warranted. I did have information that would interest the royal family. The bible contained instructions on how to become king. But revealing this would put me and many others in danger, so I had no intention of doing so.

“It is good to see everyone again,” Eglantine said. “I may now be your professor instead of a fellow student, but I am still glad to have this time with you all.”

Even when I was feeling so blue, Eglantine looked as pretty as ever. She wore a captivating smile and moved with elegant steps as though performing a dance. After giving the usual, lengthy noble greetings, she explained why she had been chosen to replace the older woman from the royal branch family that had previously led this course. She had come first-in-class among the other archduke candidates in her year, and the king had apparently deemed her the best suited to lead the future generation of students.

“Now that I have received this duty, I intend to do everything in my power to make you all proper archduke candidates,” Eglantine concluded. She then looked to her assistants, who began distributing the boxes they had carried in a short while before.

Once everyone had a box, the assistants briskly exited the room—presumably so that they wouldn’t learn the contents of our lesson. I recalled Ferdinand forbidding anyone but archduke candidates from attending his study sessions.

“Think of this as a more basic form of the foundational magic,”

Eglantine said, making everyone look at the box in front of them. Looking at it from the top, it was a square about sixty centimeters wide, full of dry-looking sand that reminded me of a desert. At the very center was a magic tool about ten centimeters in diameter lined with marble-sized feystones of various colors.

This is pretty big.

It was about twice as large as the one we had used in our studies with Ferdinand. As I examined it for any other differences, the lecture began.

“Over the span of the third-year archduke candidate course, you will learn how to control the foundational magic,” Eglantine said. We were each going to form a city in our sandbox and then practice using a simplified version of the foundational magic. It was the same thing that Ferdinand had gotten us to do.

Which is good, obviously. I would be pretty confused if our class covered something else entirely.

“This box represents your duchy, and the magic tool in the center is a mock version of the foundational magic,” Eglantine continued with a smile. The dry sand was what one got when the ground ran out of mana, but by feeding it with our own mana, we could produce fertile earth. “First, take out your schtappes and dye your duchy with your mana.”

We formed our schtappes, as instructed—there was no better tool for modulating mana. I then channeled my mana into the very tip and touched it against one of the feystones. Although there were quite a few feystones on the magic tool, they were all connected, so you could dye them all at once by channeling mana into just one.

Okay. Let’s— Bweh?!

I was channeling my mana like I always did when dyeing something... but then I noticed that the magic tool wasn’t the only thing being affected. The entire garden was changing before my very eyes. Despite even my most frantic attempts, there was nothing I could do to stop my mana now that it was flowing. It kept dripping out of me like water from a broken faucet.

Oh no. What should I do? The schtappe isn’t doing its job. I can’t modulate my mana at all.

“Oh my. I was aware of the rumors, but you truly are skilled, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Lady Eglantine...”

“That is *Professor* Eglantine to you. Ahaha. Still... to think you would dye not only the magic tool, but the entire garden in so short a time...”

In the blink of an eye, the once desert-esque contents of my box had turned into black earth, from which sprouts had started to grow.

And as my mana was continuing to flow out of me, the amount of greenery was steadily increasing. Eglantine was watching all this with an amused smile, her orange eyes sparkling as she remarked that, even after hearing the rumors about me, she was still surprised to be seeing this in the flesh. It just made me want to cry.

Don't look so moved, Eglantine! I'm a problem child who can't even manage her mana right!

Eglantine tilted her head, still watching my newly made garden. "Oh, whatever shall I do? My plan for today's lesson was to have everyone dye their foundation and then fill their duchy with mana, but it seems you are already almost done. Would you like to progress to the next step? Or will you keep pace with the others and wait until the next lesson?"

I paused for a moment and then said, "I would like to finish the class sooner. I need to practice my mana control after this, and, in any case, I cannot leave until class ends and my retainers come to get me."

I was given the next steps, which were to draw the necessary blueprints for making the border barrier and gates, and to prepare the golden powder needed for entwickeln.

"In the next class, I will teach you the names of the God of Darkness and the Goddess of Light," Eglantine said. "That will open many avenues for you."

"Right."

Ferdinand had not yet taught me their names—and since the spells I used referred to them only as the "God of Darkness" and the "Goddess of Light," anything I made with entwickeln fell apart after about five minutes. Surely the world could understand the profound despair I had felt upon seeing a model of my dream library crumble away before my very eyes.

Incidentally, when I had tried to mourn the loss of my library, Ferdinand had scolded me for wasting time and forbidden me from making another one. My next course of action had been to create my room and fill it with bookshelves... which had made him yell at me again, saying that I might as well have made another library.

These thoughts of the past floated through my mind as I completed my work.

Channeling mana into feystones and turning them into gold dust is easy-peasy.

As I gripped the feystones given to me and turned them to gold dust one by one, Hannelore, who was pressing her schtappe against the magic tool in her box, looked over in shock. "It certainly seems easy for you to turn feystones to dust, Lady Rozemyne."

"Right now, it's easier for me to blast my mana at things indiscriminately. Between you and me"—I reduced my voice to a

whisper—"the divine protections ritual has left me completely unable to restrain my mana. Anything I do runs the risk of turning into a blessing."

She widened her eyes, then giggled in amusement. "Oh my. If you were to give a blessing here like you did in music class, then everyone's gardens might end up dyed with your mana."

"I am taking care to ensure that that does not happen. In practice, I ended up becoming Schwartz and Weiss's owner through a blessing."

Were I to give a blessing right here and now, it was possible that I might overwrite everyone else's boxes and make them my own. I couldn't risk that happening.

Hannelore's red eyes wandered for a while, then she gave me a small, troubled smile. "I was speaking in jest, but I suppose it would actually be possible for you, Lady Rozemyne."

OH NOOOOOO!

"Oho... hohohoh... hohoho. I, too, was merely speaking in jest," I said, venturing a smile while turning one feystone after another into dust. I was desperately hoping she would believe me.

Eeeh... Okay. She doesn't believe me. She's completely unnerved.

As I floundered in place, wishing that someone would save me, I heard Wilfried speak up from somewhere behind me. "Professor Eglantine, I finished dyeing the magic tool as well," he said in a bright voice. "The divine protections really have made my mana easier to use—and less costly too."

I turned around, my eyes brimming with tears, and saw Wilfried proudly showing off the garden he had made while Eglantine praised him. He was the very image of an honor student who knew no struggles in life.

Wilfried got a bunch of divine protections too! How come he isn't suffering for it?!

After venting my frustrations on him, I prayed from the bottom of my heart to the gods who had given me their divine protections.

O gods, please don't let Hannelore say she doesn't want to be friends with me anymore!

Dedication Whirling (Third Year)

I came out of my room and trudged downstairs in my Pandabus, my shoulders slumped, still distraught that I had weirded out my precious bookworm friend. I had been asked to wait in the common room until lunch was prepared, and, when I arrived, I found that Wilfried and Charlotte were already there, reading books.

“Sister,” Charlotte said, looking up when she heard my arrival, “we have whirling practice this afternoon, which means we get to spend a class together.”

I nodded in response, wearing a pleasant smile... but then the blood drained from my face. I had come to a terrifying realization. In my current state, it was clear as day that blessings would practically explode out of me the moment I started to perform a dedication whirl. And, considering that I had already committed such a tragic blunder during my morning classes, that would make Hannelore run away from me for sure.

Anything but that! I need to rely on someone other than the gods!

“Wilfried, Charlotte, I can no longer control my mana and will almost certainly fire out one blessing after another during class,” I said. “By any chance, do you know how I might be able to avoid this?”

My two siblings—and pretty much everyone else in the common room—began to give my question some serious thought. As it turned out, those who received my blessings during classes also started getting strange looks from the other students. This was now the entire dormitory’s problem.

“Professor Hirschur said you just need to use up your mana, didn’t she?” Wilfried asked.

I shook my head, having already racked my brain for such solutions. “I expended some of my mana at the gathering spot yesterday, but it accomplished nothing.”

“Oh, right. I remember being surprised about that, but I see now that you were trying to dump your mana...”

Charlotte was next to speak, her indigo eyes sparkling in wonder. “You used that much mana and it still didn’t change things, Sister?!”

“Not in the slightest,” Wilfried replied on my behalf. “It helped so little that Rozemyne ended up being the only one to almost finish the whole class this morning. She was absolutely mortified when this

freaked out Lady Hannelore, who was sitting right beside her. She even started taking her anger out on me, saying that it wasn't fair how little I'm struggling even though I got a bunch of divine protections too."

Charlotte gave me a sympathetic look, then fell into thought. "Could you not try using even more mana, then? In fact, if you send a letter home saying that you wish to pour as much mana into feystones and magic tools as possible before afternoon classes, then you might even receive them by the time we finish eating..." Her eyes flitted to the children of the former Veronica faction. "As the Lord of Winter is due to appear soon, I am sure the Knight's Order will appreciate the assistance."

I could tell that she had wanted to add, "Plus, Ehrenfest is doubtless short on mana due to the purge," but she had wisely stayed quiet.

"If you want to help out with the Lord of Winter hunt, how about sending herbs?" Wilfried suggested. "The ones in our gathering spot have more mana and elements because of you growing them with your mana, right? Couldn't you expend a ton of mana if we pick all the herbs, then you heal the spot over and over?"

"That would not be of much use today, as that is too much for us to do in a single afternoon, but the idea is sound. Ehrenfest and I will both benefit."

We were unable to come up with any other solutions, so I instructed Philine to pen an emergency letter to Ehrenfest. It said, "I received so many divine protections that I cannot control my mana, and I will most likely explode with blessings during this afternoon's whirling class. Please send any empty feystones and magic tools you have—be they for the Dedication Ritual, the Lord of Winter hunt, or anything else."

"Roderick," I said, "please send this to Ehrenfest—and stress that it is urgent."

"Understood."

I watched as Roderick briskly exited the room.

"Um, Lady Rozemyne..." Judithe said to me in a quiet voice. "If you have so much mana to spare, could you fill my feystones too?"

"Of course. *Ahem...* And not just yours, Judithe! Anyone who needs mana, step forth! I shall give mine freely until our dedication whirling class. This is an emergency!"

A stir ran through the common room, but most still seemed hesitant to accept the mana of an archduke candidate. In the midst of all this, there came a light clinking noise as Leonore pulled out some feystones and magic tools from a bag on her hip.

"I would have these filled with mana, then," she said. "I used

them up during training and was just about to need to refill them.”

“I thank you ever so much,” I said, then began to channel my mana into the items she had given me.

Next to come forward was Alexis, one of the boys serving Wilfried as a guard knight. He quite haltingly asked me whether his feystones would suffice as well.

“But of course. I will accept stones from anyone, be it you, Natalie, Matthias, or Laurenz,” I said, looking around the common room.

The apprentice knights promptly raced to their rooms to fetch their feystones and magic tools, leaving behind the minimum number of guards necessary. The apprentice scholars and attendants followed right behind them.

“Milady, I cannot say I approve of you giving away your mana like this...” Rihyarda said.

“I understand, but these are dire times,” I replied, pursing my lips as I started to fill my guard knights’ feystones. I wasn’t being so charitable by choice; rather, I didn’t want to be a ticking time bomb during class.

“Please and thank you!”

The feystones lined up before me varied in size from small to large. I pointed at several among them and said, “There is a risk of smaller feystones like these being turned to gold dust, so take care.”

Those who wanted to keep using their small feystones hurriedly took them back... while some apprentice scholars actually put more forward, their eyes sparkling at the prospect of obtaining gold dust. Soon enough, the table in front of me was completely covered with feystones. I reached out and started filling them one by one.

“I thank you ever so much, Lady Rozemyne.”

Those who received their newly filled stones did so with bright smiles, while others got to work gathering their fresh gold dust. It was then that the bell rang to signify that lunch was ready.

“I will finish the rest after eating,” I announced—and that was precisely what I did. Even as I continued to work my way through the remaining feystones, all of my divine protections meant that I could barely feel any mana leaving me.

“How much must I use to be able to contain my blessings?” I asked.

“None of us can answer that for you, I’m afraid.”

Not long after our meal, the first wave of empty feystones arrived from Ehrenfest; a second wave would apparently be sent at night. I got straight to work filling them with mana so that we could send them back. Many of those Sylvester had sent were fairly large, and they drained a surprising amount of my mana.

“Will this be enough...?” I wondered aloud.

“If you still end up letting out a blessing, then how about pretending to pass out and making a general mess of things so that people are too distracted to notice?” Wilfried said. “After getting a passing grade, I mean.”

Charlotte nodded. “If we say that you simply wanted to bless everyone, even at the cost of depleting all of your mana, then they won’t know just how much mana you have.”

“Lady Charlotte,” Brunhilde interjected, “that may disguise her mana capacity, but it will only cause legends about her sainthood to spread even faster.”

“I would not want that,” I agreed.

Charlotte placed a troubled hand on her cheek. “But it is too late to deny your sainthood any longer, is it not? You received so many divine protections that you refuse to give us the precise number, and blessings seem to overflow from your every action, no matter your intentions.”

“Ngh...”

“Our focus needs to be on how we can disguise your protections and control your image in the eyes of others. It is already widely known that you have plentiful mana and pray as often as you give blessings, so denying this sainthood outright is no longer an option.”

Of course, I wasn’t actually a saint... but Charlotte was entirely in the right.

“We can talk about manipulating Rozemyne’s reputation later,” Wilfried said. “This afternoon’s dedication whirling class comes first, and we don’t have much time left. Rozemyne, maybe you should wear all the charms that Uncle gave you to keep any blessings at bay and plan around spilling as little mana as possible.”

“I shall do just that,” I replied, then hurried to my room. As well as all of my charms from Ferdinand, I also put on a necklace of several feystones strung together for good measure. To an unaware onlooker, it would seem that I wasn’t wearing very many charms at all, but I was wearing a veritable suit of armor of them beneath my clothes.

“That should do it,” I said upon my return. “Wilfried, Charlotte—if worse comes to worst, drag me out of the Small Hall.” As our class was going to be made up entirely of archduke candidates, they were the only ones I could rely on.

My siblings replied with firm, determined nods, while Rihyarda volunteered to stand at the ready outside the door.

After pumping ourselves up, Wilfried, Charlotte, and I entered the Small Hall. It was my first time feeling so tense about whirling practice. Wilfried went over to Ortwin, while Charlotte went to greet her own friend, Luzinde. I greeted Luzinde as well, then looked

around for one person in particular.

There she is. Lady Hannelore.

I had seriously weirded her out today; whether it was safe for me to greet her here was a point of serious concern. If she avoided me, I could see myself getting so depressed that I wouldn't want to leave my hidden room for days.

All of a sudden, my eyes met Hannelore's. She waved at me with a smile.

She's not avoiding me! Oh, I'm so happy! Thank you, gods!

I went to greet Hannelore, but Charlotte grabbed my sleeve to stop me. "Sister, you seem a little excitable. Are you well?"

"I... I'm quite fine."

Right, right. Can't get excited. Hold it all in. Hold it all in.

I pressed a hand to my chest and took several deep breaths—which only made Luzinde peer at me with concern. "Are you not feeling well today, Lady Rozemyne?" she asked.

"She is fine, but the dedication whirl always places a slight burden on her," Charlotte explained. "For one, it involves exercise, which she naturally struggles with—but as the High Bishop, she also cannot help but put extra effort into a dance for the gods." She sounded a little concerned, but her support was perfect. It was an excellent cover for if my dancing did produce a blessing, and it made it safe for me to pretend to pass out.

That's my little sister for you!

I showered Charlotte with praise on the inside, then noticed that Hannelore was coming our way. Her eyes were flitting all over in worry, most likely because Lestilaut was accompanying her.

"Good day, Lady Rozemyne," she said.

Charlotte and Luzinde smoothly distanced themselves. This greeting alone had been enough for them to deduce that this was a personal matter.

I smiled at the two Dunkelfelger students. "Good day, Lady Hannelore, Lord Lestilaut. Might you have business with me?"

"When do you intend to hold the tea party between our two duchies?" Lestilaut asked rather bluntly. "Depending on the quality of the hairpin, I may need to order another. I would rather it be done sooner rather than later."

Was he insinuating that a hairpin from my darling Tuuli might not be enough? I could feel something inside me about to snap—but then Hannelore put a hand on her cheek and shook her head. "Brother, could you not simply be honest and say that you are looking forward to seeing how Ehrenfest's hairpin turns out?" she said.

"I merely have a passing interest in what a backwater duchy such as Ehrenfest can produce; I would not say I am looking forward to

anything.”

“Did you not ask to come over here with me because you wanted to arrange a date for our tea party? Lady Rozemyne always passes her classes the first time around, and, as I recall, you wanted to make the most of this rare opportunity to speak with her.”

Lestilaut turned his head away and gave an arrogant scoff, as if denying the accusation entirely, while Hannelore continued doing her best to smooth things over. It was a question of whom I should trust—and the answer was simple. Hannelore was my friend.

“Lord Lestilaut, I am glad that you are looking forward to seeing the hairpin,” I said. “However, as I also plan to take the scholar course this year, I will not have time to socialize in the near future. Hm... Perhaps we could review our schedules ten days from now? We may be in a better position to make plans then.”

“T-Ten days...? Very well,” Lestilaut replied with a nod.

Hannelore sighed, relieved that we had come to an agreement, and a soft smile arose on her face. It was a pleasant sight, and one that was tragically interrupted as another voice reached my ears.

“Oh my. You ordered a hairpin from Ehrenfest as well, Lord Lestilaut? My fiancé is from Ehrenfest, so I have ordered from them as well.”

It was Detlinde, forcing a very noble laugh as she made her way over.

Lestilaut’s lips twisted into a grimace. “I wish only to confirm the best that a backwater duchy such as Ehrenfest can manage.”

“Ah, is that so? But you still intend to gift yours to whomever you escort, no? In the same way that I shall receive my own.”

Oh, right! I need to emphasize that Ferdinand had nothing to do with designing Detlinde’s hairpins!

Recalling one of my sacred duties, I quickly donned a smile. “Lady Detlinde went all the way to Ehrenfest to socialize with her fiancé. There, she chose the hairpins she desired.”

“Your fiancé did not choose them for you?” Lestilaut asked, sounding a little dumbstruck.

Detlinde’s smile broadened. “He will only be gifting them to me.”

“Hm... I struggle to believe Lord Ferdinand’s aesthetic sense is that poor,” Lestilaut muttered, looking between Detlinde and my hair stick. “What exactly did you have him order for you?”

“I have yet to receive them, so I could not tell you how they look,” Detlinde replied, emphasizing that they were gifts and not a purchase she had made for herself. She then shot me a look that seemed to say, “Explain.”

“Lady Detlinde is due to be gifted five hairpins styled after schentis flowers. They are all on the smaller side, but if you imagine

Lady Adolphine's hairpin, then that should give you a good idea of their appearance. Most notable is how they form a gentle gradient from red to white."

Hannelore blinked in surprise, while Lestilaut gave a look of exasperation. "You ordered *five* hairpins just for your graduation ceremony?" he asked.

"In other words, my fiancé is gifting me the most wondrous hairpins possible." Detlinde's red lips curved into an even wider grin. "I cannot wait to see them."

In an annoying twist, Detlinde wasn't giving verbal confirmation that she had designed the hairpins herself. My only choice was to switch up my approach. The flowery designs themselves very much resembled Adolphine's hairpins, meaning they weren't at all unstylish. In other words, when it came time for Detlinde to put on her hairpins, we could just blame her for having decided to wear them all at once.

"The number may come as a surprise," I said, "but none will go to waste. Each is its own unique color, and the wearer can select which and how many to use when the time comes, to perfectly suit whatever atmosphere or dress is needed."

"I see," Lestilaut murmured. "Mixing and matching to create untold variety is rather clever."

Detlinde puffed out her chest. "Indeed, and it was *I* who suggested this system, I shall have you know."

"I am confident that Ehrenfest has met Lady Detlinde's requests perfectly. Her designs are truly splendid," I said, doing my best to prop her up.

Detlinde nodded along with a satisfied smile. "They are, aren't they? I certainly could not have entrusted it all to Ehrenfest's craftspeople. Nobody knows what suits me better than I."

It was Brunhilde and the others who came up with all this, but, well... whatever. I finally got Detlinde to admit that she designed them, and that's good enough for me.

"I must say, I am looking forward to seeing these hairpins at our graduation," Lestilaut said.

"Indeed," Detlinde replied. "I am sure you will find yourself stunned silent. Ohohoho."

As we continued our conversation, the professors entered. Eglantine was among them.

"Lady Eglantine has offered to demonstrate whirling for us today," our whirling teacher announced. "Watch carefully, everyone, no matter whether you are a junior or a senior."

Lady Eglantine removed her black cape with a smile and gave it to a woman who was probably her attendant. She then made her way to the center of the room, each step so graceful that one might have

thought the dance had already begun, whereupon she knelt.

After a moment of quiet, she shot her head up, then began to move like a leaf on the wind. Her slender arms stretched up toward the ceiling as though she were reaching for the distant heights.

It's... so pretty!

I could not help but sigh in awe, watching with rapt attention so as not to miss even a second of Eglantine's whirling. Everything was perfect—the way her fingers sliced through the air, how her clothes swirled around her, her completely focused gaze... Just watching her filled me with happiness.

As I stood there, enraptured, Detlinde heaved an exaggerated sigh; she was due to play the Goddess of Light during this year's graduation ceremony. "I do not imagine she has any bad intentions, but I cannot approve of this overconfidence. Is whirling after one's graduation not akin to the Goddess of Chaos pushing forward the God of Winter?"

Instead of complaining about Lady Eglantine's demonstration being unnecessary or arrogant, how about you watch carefully and try to learn from it? At this rate, Lord Lestilaut's performance as the God of Darkness will put you to shame.

Charlotte, who was watching the demonstration beside me, smiled at Detlinde. "Professor Eglantine had already graduated by the time I joined the Royal Academy, so I am overjoyed to have this opportunity to witness her splendid whirling myself."

Eglantine soon finished, at which point it was time for us to practice ourselves. The new students would only be watching, but the rest of us would be dancing with the others in our grades.

As I was heading to the spot for third-years, Eglantine smiled at me. "You performed such a tremendous whirl in your first year, Lady Rozemyne. I cannot wait to see how much you have improved."

"I can already feel the weight of your expectations, Professor Eglantine," I replied. It was probably true that she was looking forward to seeing me perform, since she truly did adore whirling as an art form, but it was equally likely that she wanted to extract as much information from me as she could. Otherwise, she wouldn't have come all this way to a class she had nothing to do with.

No blessings. No blessings. No blessings.

I made eye contact with Charlotte, who was watching by the wall. Her fingers were tightly interwoven, and she looked noticeably tense. We exchanged nods.

This is pretty nerve-racking.

I took a deep breath, then knelt; I needed to finish my dedication whirl without letting out a blessing.

"I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world," Hannelore began. She was leading the prayer as

the highest-ranked archduke candidate in our grade, and the rest of us needed to repeat after her. Of course, as I was being so cautious, I mouthed the words and nothing more.

And now for the prayer pose.

To me, whirling was a highly dangerous dance that came with the risk of an impromptu blessing. I honed my senses such that I could feel every nerve in my fingertips and focused my mind to prevent even a single drop of my mana from slipping out. I could say with all confidence that I had never danced so seriously in my entire life.

Even during the slow, opening stages of the dance, my body grew hot and became covered in a sheen of sweat. The very act of breathing started to hurt a little. Giving in to the blessing would have come as a wonderful release from my torment, but I couldn't risk standing out any more than I did already. I extended my hands and whirled, my hair spinning alongside my long sleeves.

Just a bit more.

The faster I whirled, the heavier my breathing became. I focused on keeping my balance and forced down the mana squirming within me as it turned into a boiling heat.

My fingertips cut through the air for a short while longer, then I returned to kneeling. I could feel cold air against my cheeks, and I was sweating heavily... but it was done. I hadn't let out a blessing.

I... I win! I worked so hard, and it all paid off. Someone praise me!

But as I exhaled in relief, it suddenly occurred to me—something wasn't right.

What the heck?! My whole body is sparkling!

The feystones I was wearing had all been filled with my mana, and they were now shining furiously as if to emphasize their presence. My bracelets, my necklace—every charm on me was emitting a dazzling light. I tumbled back onto my rear and tried to cover them with my hands, but there was nothing I could do.

Is this... a good thing? A bad thing? Have I still made it?

I gazed at Charlotte, unable to determine whether this was better or worse than a blessing. She paled and rushed over to me at once.

"Sister, just how much mana did you try to put into that blessing?!" Charlotte exclaimed, speaking much louder than was necessary. "At this rate, you will fall unconscious again!"

"I... I didn't give a blessing though, right?" I asked to double-check.

Charlotte shook her head. "It did not become a blessing, but, even so, your intention to pray to the gods is known by all. That is more than enough. Brother, let us take our sister to the dormitory."

"Not yet, Charlotte... I still need to pass..." I replied. After all my hard work, I couldn't bear to leave now. I turned my attention to the

professor, who then seemed to snap back to reality.

"I have observed your most heartfelt and sincerest whirl, Lady Rozemyne. You pass, of course. I must now ask that you get some rest. Please do take care of yourself."

"I thank you."

It was then that I noticed the many stunned eyes glued to me; it was hard not to be the center of attention when I was literally sparkling. "Everyone, I apologize for disturbing class," I said, fighting back the urge to cry.

I worked so hard to avoid this and did everything I could to prepare, but... I still failed.

Wilfried and Charlotte helped me up and escorted me out of the Small Hall. I still wanted to cry, and my body still felt uncomfortably hot.

"Lady Rozemyne..." Rihyarda said when she saw us. "Wilfried, my boy, take Charlotte and return to class. I shall take care of things from here." She had figured out everything from the state of my feystones, and she wasted no time taking me back to the dormitory.

We arrived to find that the second batch of feystones and magic tools had arrived from Ehrenfest. Filling them up relieved some of the heat inside of me, which felt nice.

"Rihyarda, what's this?" I asked.

"A letter from Aub Ehrenfest," she replied. As well as sending me more feystones and magic tools, Sylvester had set a date for his meeting with Hirschur.

Hirschur's Meeting with the Aub

Securing a passing grade in whirling class had proven to be a hard-fought battle, but I had come out on top. Rather than feeling accomplished, however, I was terrified by how everyone had looked at me. Wilfried and Charlotte took me to a meeting room as soon as they returned from class themselves, whereupon I asked them to debrief me, quaking with fear. They both shared a sigh in response, their expressions unreadable.

"You contained the blessing but were unable to keep the feystones on your body from shining..." Charlotte said. "All who saw the sight are surely convinced of your sainthood. Isn't that right, Brother?"

Wilfried nodded. "Yeah. It was so bright that I got distracted from my own whirl. You really stood out, Rozemyne." It came as no surprise that people had been stunned, but it hadn't even crossed my mind that other students had stopped whirling themselves to stare at me.

Just trying to suppress any blessings was hard enough!

"A-And what did the others think?"

"Not sure; nobody was really willing to talk about it," Wilfried replied. "Everyone seemed to shake themselves out of their stupors after you left and then returned to practicing."

"They are all archduke candidates, so everyone is skilled at hiding their true thoughts and emotions," Charlotte added with a sigh. "It will take some time before we learn what people thought and what manner of reports they gave to their aubs."

Since dedication whirl practice was attended only by archduke candidates, not many had seen the incident, unlike during my music class with the archnobles. However, as every single person who had witnessed the scene was more or less near the very top of their respective duchies, we could not yet determine the repercussions.

"I see... In any case, we just received this letter from Ehrenfest," I said, presenting a board. "Sylvester will be coming at dinnertime two days from now to meet with Professor Hirschur. I sent an ordonnanz to her already."

Wilfried and Charlotte exchanged worried glances. "I see. Father is coming..." Wilfried mumbled.

"I suppose it is important that we discuss what we have learned about divine protections before making that information public,"

Charlotte agreed. They both wore clouded expressions, doubtless because we were also going to find out the results of the purge.

There was still some time before Sylvester was due to arrive, so we took everyone—the children of the former Veronica faction included—to our duchy’s gathering spot. The students all collected as many ingredients as possible, then I regenerated the spot with a blessing. It was a gesture both to help with the Lord of Winter hunt and to indicate that things were still well in the dormitory.

“Miladies,” Rihyarda said to Charlotte and me, “we have received word from the guard at the teleportation circle. It is time.”

Charlotte and I gazed up at her. We were free to meet with Sylvester—I had finished my afternoon class early, and Charlotte had already finished all of her written lessons—but this was happening much sooner than dinner.

“I suppose a pre-meeting talk is necessary,” I said. “Rihyarda, if you would prepare a meeting room...”

“One has already been prepared,” Rihyarda replied. She had apparently made all of the necessary arrangements while directing the younger apprentice attendants in the dormitory. I hadn’t noticed, since I had been reading in the common room at the time.

And so, we headed to the teleportation hall. Three guard knights came out first, then stood at attention while waiting for their lord to follow.

“Mother is here too?!” Charlotte cried out in shock. We had only been expecting Sylvester, but Florencia was suddenly standing before us, her indigo eyes which so closely resembled Charlotte’s focused on us both.

Florencia rested a hand on her cheek. “This discussion with Professor Hirschur is going to prove crucial for the future of our duchy. I must participate as well, you see.”

“I was busy with other things, so Florencia read all your reports this year,” Sylvester added with a shrug. He had apparently been drowning in work ever since Matthias’s warning had required the purge to be sped up, which was why Florencia had gone through our messages from the Royal Academy in his place.

We went to the meeting room that Rihyarda had prepared and got ready for our pre-meeting. Our attendants poured us some tea, and, as things started to settle down, Wilfried joined us. He had just finished his practical lesson.

“Sorry for the wait. I’m here.”

“We have yet to begin, Wilfried,” Florencia said. “As your mother, I am glad to hear that you have been working so hard.”

“I didn’t expect you to be here too, Mother.”

“Everyone truly says the same thing...” Florencia replied with a refined giggle. “You all sent highly critical reports so soon after your arrival at the Royal Academy, correct? That certainly made Sylvester and all of the Knight’s Order very busy. Thus, I took on the duty of reading all of your reports—and, I must say, I was truly astounded by what I discovered as they poured in day after day.”

On the first day of our third-year practical lessons, only those with connections to me had earned divine protections in spades. These same divine protections had caused me to lose control of my mana, then, the very next day, a blessing had shot out of me while I was playing the harspiel. Hirschur had sent her request for a meeting not long after—an unusual development in itself, considering her long streak of saying there was absolutely nothing to report. And as the cherry on top of this already strange sundae, the meeting was going to be about revealing a way to increase one’s divine protections.

After reading these reports, Florencia had immediately determined that this was not something she could deal with alone. To this end, she had consulted Sylvester, Karstedt, and Elvira.

Florencia had thanked her lucky stars upon learning about my plan to deal with my mana using the gathering spot on Earthday—but then she had received my request for as many feystones as Ehrenfest could provide the very next day. She had apparently found the whole situation a real struggle to manage.

“Furthermore, the feystones were filled with mana and returned almost immediately, were they not?” Florencia continued. “I spent that afternoon asking the Knight’s Order to gather empty feystones, having my attendant clear my schedule to make time for meeting Hirschur, and getting my scholar to write letters.”

Then, after making these arrangements, Florencia had sat there worrying how my whirling would go. Of course, she hadn’t needed to wait that long—a report had soon arrived saying that, while I had managed to prevent a blessing from shooting out, all of my feystones had started to shine and attracted just as much attention anyway.

Hearing about all this from a more objective viewpoint, it certainly does sound like an incomprehensible mess.

“In any case, Rozemyne, what do you think about publicizing what we know of the divine protections?” Florencia asked.

“Revealing a portion of our knowledge sounds wise. I mean, for Professor Hirschur to have actually gotten involved and given direct advice, the situation surrounding Ehrenfest must be dire. She said that our continued rise through the duchy rankings has caused our reputation to plummet.”

The archducal couple hardened their expressions, as did the scholars and attendants around them.

“Is it not important for top-ranking duchies to assist the bottom-ranking duchies?” I asked. “Every duchy is experiencing a mana shortage to some degree or another, so would it not be in our best interests to improve our relationships with them by teaching them how to get more divine protections and increase their mana efficiency?”

Of course, any duchy that wished to make use of this mana would need to improve its relationship with its temple. If nobles had to start begrudgingly visiting temples for ceremonies, then I imagined that the temples would improve for the better.

“I have heard that Frenbtag has seen better harvests ever since it copied us and started getting its archduke candidates to go through its Central District,” I continued. “However, I don’t believe that this knowledge spread much more than that, as they are hesitant to say that their nobles visit the temple.”

Rudiger had mentioned during the fellowship gathering that he was participating in temple ceremonies and filling his duchy’s land with mana, but I doubted that he would ever admit it during a tea party or what have you. At the very least, such news hadn’t reached my ears.

“Yeah. During our male socializing events, Lord Rudiger never once mentioned that he had gone to the temple, nor that he was grateful to Ehrenfest,” Wilfried said.

“I, too, have attended tea parties with lesser and middle duchies, but not once has a Frenbtag noble mentioned their archduke candidates participating in rituals,” Charlotte added. “That said, it did come up briefly during one of the familial tea parties that Lady Detlinde hosted.”

Sylvester exchanged a glance with Florencia and then said, “The same goes for the Archduke Conference. My sister Constanze thanked us during a family dinner, but she didn’t say a word about going to the temple during the actual archduke meetings.”

“Frenbtag no doubt wishes to avoid any further suspicion from greater duchies now that it ranks among the lowest middle duchies,” Florencia lamented. She then turned to Sylvester. “That said, if my brother and your sister had only mentioned this, then they could have helped us to clear some of the poor rumors shrouding Ehrenfest.”

Frenbtag’s archducal couple was Florencia’s brother and Sylvester’s sister, and these familial ties had a considerable impact on relations between the two duchies, for better and worse. It was only natural that a bottom-ranking duchy would prioritize its own reputation above all else, exactly as Ehrenfest had done up until recently.

“Thus, I believe it best to publicize how to get more divine

protections—in part to help clear the bad rumors around you, Sylvester. Of course, we won't reveal everything. I think that sticking with the more obvious, uncontroversial elements will suffice."

"Makes sense," Sylvester replied. "I'll let you work out what that'll be, then."

"Aub Ehrenfest, Professor Hirschur has arrived," announced a voice once we had finished discussing the major elements of the meeting.

Hirschur entered, took the seat across from Sylvester, and said, "It has been a long time, Aub Ehrenfest." The air between them felt especially tense.

"Indeed," Sylvester replied. "We don't tend to see each other at the Interduchy Tournament."

Florencia leaned forward with a smile, perhaps hoping to soften their hard expressions. "Your request for this meeting came as such a boon to us, Professor Hirschur. Due to the rules of the Royal Academy, we could not have involved ourselves in these matters otherwise."

"Yeah. We appreciate it," Sylvester continued. "And, on that note—I've been meaning to properly apologize to you, face-to-face. How my mother treated you was unacceptable. I did not know the half of what was happening here before Ferdinand told me, and it makes me feel so pathetic."

Hirschur sighed and shook her head. "You have already apologized by letter, Lord Sylvester. An aub should not be so quick to bow in front of others."

"I offered to provide financial support now that Ferdinand is no longer able, but you made it clear that you do not want help from Ehrenfest... Doesn't that mean you don't intend to forgive me?" Sylvester asked, wearing a rather pitiful expression.

Hirschur smiled, then shook her head again. "I can accept your apology but not your financial support. My assistance extends only as far as concealing more problematic matters; I am not helping with solutions, so I will make do with financing myself." Her gaze wandered to me. "Accepting money from you will only cause me more issues than I am willing to endure. In fact, I am offended that you would think me willing to work for you after being left on my own for so long. Financing me is a long-term commitment, not something to be done only when you desire my services."

Through that small glance alone, Hirschur was clearly marking me as someone who would cause a mountain of problems for her. Sylvester must have noticed this, as he was looking at me as well.

"What about after Rozemyne graduates, then?"

"Hm. I may reconsider when the time comes."

She changed her tune that fast?!

“Professor Hirschur!” I exclaimed. “Shouldn’t you have acted all cool and said that your principles will never change or something?!”

“Oh? You should know my principles by now, Lady Rozemyne: all is for the sake of research,” Hirschur replied, an unmistakable glint in her purple eyes. I couldn’t help but slump my shoulders; she really was set in her ways.

Sylvester cackled and slapped me on the back. “Can you blame her, Rozemyne? You’re somehow managing to cause bigger problems by the year.”

“Wait, really? I thought things were staying about the same,” I said. There were always daily reports, but I’d never even considered that the problems were getting worse.

Everyone stared at me in a daze, then Wilfried grabbed me by the shoulders. “Rozemyne, did you even *think* before saying that? Things *seemed* pretty bad in our first year, sure, but nobody had to be called to the Royal Academy. In our second year, Uncle had to force his way in for a few days, and now, within a week of our third year, our dormitory supervisor has requested a meeting with the aub. Can’t you see that the problems are getting bigger and bigger?” He was almost pleading.

His explanation kind of made sense to me—but at the same time, I had some disagreements. “It’s not like I’m causing problems because I want to, and the ones this year were completely out of my control. I got so many divine protections as a result of my being the High Bishop, and my blessing during music class was because my schtappe couldn’t control my mana anymore. As for what happened in whirling class, I stood out even more precisely because we all worked together to try to prevent any issues.” I clenched my fist and shot it up into the air. “If you ask me, the real person to blame is whoever changed the school curriculum!”

Hirschur rubbed her temples in a way that immediately brought Ferdinand to mind. “This may be a private meeting, but you would do well not to openly criticize the king and his policies,” she said.

“Wait, I’m struggling right now because of *the king*?! It’s his fault?!”

Sylvester waved away my complaining. “Rozemyne, she told you to shut up. You’d do well to listen.”

“Er, right... My apologies.”

I’ll keep those kinds of criticisms to myself going forward. Still, though—you’re such a jerk, Mr. King!

Soon after Sylvester had apologized to Hirschur and things had settled down, dinner began. A more detailed discussion would

continue once we had all eaten. As the archducal couple was here, we of the archducal family were eating separately from the other students.

“Okay, what I’m about to say isn’t a criticism of the king but an honest request,” I said, looking up at Hirschur after ensuring that I wouldn’t be misunderstood. “Experiencing a great change in the flow of one’s mana and mana efficiency *after* obtaining a schtappe causes severe problems when it comes to mana control. I believe that students should obtain their schtappes and divine protections right before their graduation, as it used to be.”

“You are the first person to experience such problems, so it will take quite some time before any such changes are made,” Hirschur replied. She then went on to describe the benefits of obtaining one’s schtappe early. Students without one would need to prepare so many magic tools for class, and the mana costs were much higher as well.

As schtappes greatly improved one’s mana efficiency and expanded what one could do, they allowed for even those who were still underage to assist their duchy. It had been tremendously beneficial, back when the number of nobles plummeted following the civil war; in particular, it had been important when former blue priests and shrine maidens had attended the Academy under special circumstances.

“That said,” Hirschur continued, “these pros will not outweigh the cons forever. Ehrenfest is changing through its new mana compression method, and students will soon obtain more divine protections through their deeds and prayers. I am confident that more and more students will struggle as a result of obtaining their schtappes before their growth period ends.”

In that regard, Roderick was going to be our greatest concern. Giving his name to me had resulted in him becoming omni-elemental, and he was naturally still in his growth period. It was very likely that his mana growth would stop his current schtappe from being able to do its job properly.

“If we allow students to reach the end of their growth period and receive their divine protections from more subordinate gods first, then the schtappes they receive will surely be of a much higher quality. And, most importantly, one can only obtain a schtappe once. As such, students who end up with ones poorly suited to their final mana capacity will experience problems for life.”

As it stood, there were still records of the old curricula, and professors who knew how to teach things the old way. But as time passed and new generations of professors replaced the old, this kind of information could easily be lost. A time would eventually come when we wouldn’t be able to go back to how things were even if we wanted

to.

“I am aware that brewing can be done without a schtappe—I once did it under Ferdinand’s supervision before obtaining mine—but not Wilfried, Charlotte, or even my scholars know how,” I said. “Naturally, the means to create magic tools necessary for brewing are being forgotten more with each passing day. I view this as a significant problem.”

Hirschur paused for a moment and then said, “I shall convey something to that effect to the king.”

As our discussion about my suggestion—which definitely wasn’t a criticism—came to an end, so too did our meal. Now we were going to resume our meeting. Most of our time would no doubt be spent going over Ehrenfest’s current situation and discussing the publicizing of our findings about obtaining more divine protections.

Hirschur knew a great deal about Ehrenfest’s reputation in the Royal Academy and the Sovereignty, and she showed no intention of mincing her words. “As we know, the war was a long and violent one; those who won and those who lost all came away with very deep wounds. In the midst of all this tragedy, Ehrenfest might as well not have suffered at all, so it comes as no surprise that others feel inclined to look upon it more harshly.”

From our perspective, we were struggling more than enough as a result of the Sovereignty’s demands. But even if we wanted to complain, the other duchies surely had things much worse.

“I would like Ehrenfest to prioritize improving its relationship with other duchies above all else, but I have one concern in that regard,” Hirschur noted.

“What’s that?” Sylvester asked.

“The Sovereign knight commander seems to have quite the bone to pick with Ferdinand,” Hirschur said with a worried sigh. The fact that she had specifically said “Ferdinand” rather than “Ehrenfest” earned her many a dubious look.

“Have Ferdinand and the Sovereign knight commander even met?”

I decided to keep my mouth shut. Sylvester didn’t know that Ferdinand was a seed of Adalgisa and that he knew the Sovereign knight commander from back in those days. Hirschur probably didn’t know either, considering that she shook her head in response.

“I do not know where his animosity comes from,” she said. “Many probe me about Ehrenfest as a whole, whether it be about our trends, expanding our business slots, the secrets to our improved grades, or the truth to various rumors surrounding the duchy... but the knight commander alone asks about Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne in particular. You should take great care with him.”

I recalled our meeting with the knight commander in the library. He had called Ferdinand a seed of Adalgisa, and it had probably been during that brief encounter that he had developed the suspicions that had spurred him to advise the king to separate Ferdinand from Ehrenfest. Since then, he had gotten his wife to infiltrate the Royal Academy as a librarian to spy on me more.

“In short, we are surrounded by enemies, so I would advise that we reveal the method for obtaining more divine protections and prove ourselves useful to society. Just so you know, this is something that Prince Anastasius indicated we should do as well.”

Given our duchy’s current rank, we were supposed to be socializing as a top-ranking duchy, but we were still acting like a bottom-ranking one.

“It seems that Ehrenfest is one of only a few duchies that offers prayers during temple rituals and Mana Replenishment for the foundation,” Hirschur continued. “Our findings are well suited for Lady Rozemyne, the High Bishop, and if they are handled well, then we can expect Ehrenfest’s reputation to improve dramatically overnight.”

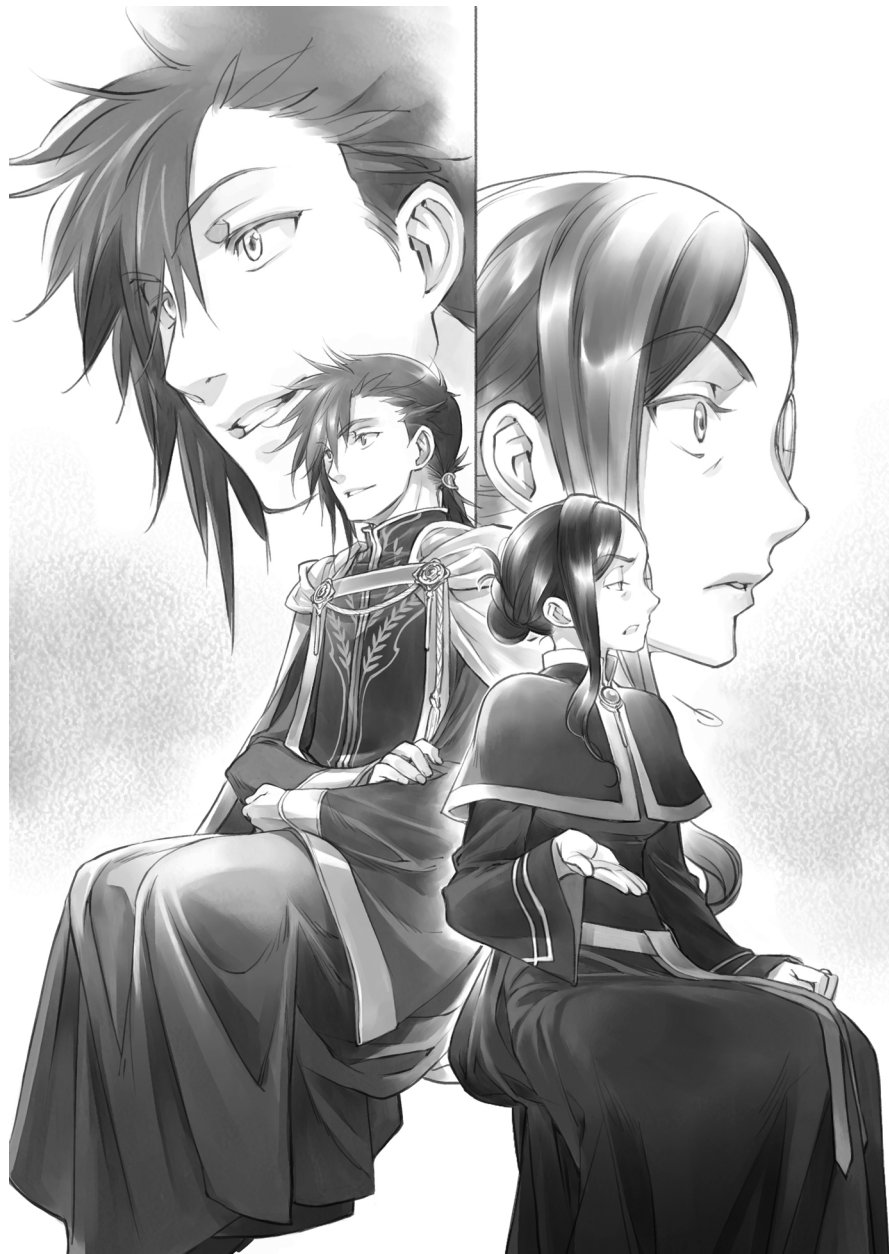
I sighed in relief—but this only made Hirschur harden her expression.

“However,” she went on, “I do not believe that other duchies will trust Ehrenfest in its current state. That is why I would recommend another approach. We have already confirmed that so many Dunkelfelger students receive Angriff’s divine protection due to their custom of praying to him, and their dormitory supervisor, Rauffen, is up to date on these matters. Perhaps you could publish this as joint research.”

“Professor Hirschur, we thank you for all your advice,” Sylvester said.

“Be cautious, though, else Dunkelfelger might claim all of your research as its own. You should also be wary of swallowing the words of a Sovereign noble such as myself so easily. You are an aub, not a student,” Hirschur concluded, sounding so much like a professor.

Sylvester gave a half-smile. “Now, what kind of brother and father would I be to not trust the person who protected Ferdinand for so long and is now protecting Rozemyne too?”



Hirschur was stunned for a moment, then she relaxed into her chair and returned a small smile. "You are as soft as ever, I see. I am glad that, even so long after your graduation, you are still the same man on the inside. Lady Florencia, do look out for Lord Sylvester. He has been unpredictable and full of energy ever since he was young."

She then began to regale us with stories of Sylvester's student days, though she was cut short when the archduke in question cried out, "Stop, stop!" They really were behaving like a professor and her student, which made Wilfried and Charlotte cover their mouths as they tried to suppress their laughter.

"Professor Hirschur, Sylvester has his hands full dealing with children even more unpredictable than he," Florencia said. "I am sure that he understands your struggles a tad more now."

"Florencia..." was all that Sylvester could manage in response.

"You are as weak to Lady Florencia as ever," Hirschur said, allowing her amusement to show for a moment before returning to a more serious expression. "Lady Rozemyne has already demonstrated her value to the archduke candidates of other duchies, having shown how many divine protections she has obtained and that her mana capacity is large enough for her to trivially give blessings. The likelihood of Lord Wilfried being targeted has increased dramatically—after all, Lady Rozemyne will once again be available if she loses her fiancé."

None of us had expected the conversation to take such a turn. We all gulped and turned to Wilfried... who merely shrugged and smiled in the face of our concerns.

"I'll be fine," he said, the picture of confidence. "Uncle warned me about that too and gave me some charms, so I can keep myself safe, at least. Rozemyne received a bunch from him too, so she should be fine as well."

Florencia put her head in her hands. "Wilfried, only when you can protect your fiancée through your own efforts can you be considered a man."

Hirschur nodded in agreement, her head also in her hands, then looked at Sylvester. "It is an aub's duty to protect the treasure of their duchy. I look forward to seeing what you can do, Lord Sylvester."

Researching Rituals and an Update on the Purge

After Hirschur left, Sylvester slowly looked around, then sighed. “Well, considering that we’ve received advice from a royal, I think we should take the joint research approach. Of course, you students are going to be the ones doing the actual research, and I imagine that Rozemyne is going to be spearheading it, since she’s a scholar, an archduke candidate, and our High Bishop. Rozemyne, what do you think about all this?”

“Well... if we need to pair up with another duchy to improve Ehrenfest’s reputation and make ourselves more trustworthy, then I would certainly like to work with Dunkelfelger.”

Sylvester eyed me carefully. “But why Dunkelfelger? If we want others to believe our research, would Drewanchel not be a better choice?”

“If we work with Dunkelfelger, then I can rely on Lady Hannelore. I have no such friends in Drewanchel. Though my main reason for wanting to work with Dunkelfelger is that its archduke candidates and apprentice knights have the divine protections of multiple gods, making them ideal test subjects.”

Drewanchel might have been a better choice for research about magic tools and circles, but this was about divine protections from the gods. In other words, they wouldn’t provide good samples.

“Not to mention,” I continued, “Dunkelfelger has Clarissa, Hartmut’s fiancée, who wishes to become my retainer. As an apprentice scholar, she should make things progress a lot more smoothly—and if our research produces good results, we will have an easier time summoning her to Ehrenfest.”

Clarissa’s parents would surely want to cancel her engagement now that Hartmut had joined Ehrenfest’s temple as the High Priest. However, if our joint research improved the public’s perception of the temple—or at least conveyed that our temple differed from those of other duchies—then perhaps that problem would resolve itself.

“Not to mention, Clarissa is an archnoble. If she marries Hartmut and comes to Ehrenfest, then we will be able to learn more about how top-ranking duchies socialize. She is going to be a crucial asset for Ehrenfest now that we are expected to behave as a top-ranking duchy.”

“Yeah. We’ll need someone like her, and soon. Let’s try to avoid the engagement getting canceled,” Sylvester agreed. Our problem was severe enough that the royal family had taken it upon themselves to interject. Ehrenfest needed to learn to act like a top-ranking duchy, and the only ones who could teach us were those already from top-ranking duchies.

Soon after Sylvester agreed that we should pair up with Dunkelfelger, Florencia instructed her scholar to prepare some ink and paper, then looked at me. “You said that you wish to reveal only the harmless aspects of this research. Please tell me which parts you think match that definition.”

“Certainly. First of all, one can raise one’s chances of receiving divine protections through prayer—though this will not work unless those prayers are sincere. One also needs to offer mana to the gods. These are all the ‘harmless’ theories that I think we should research with Dunkelfelger.”

As an additional advantage, we should be able to prove our theories by comparing the apprentice knights in Dunkelfelger who did receive divine protections with those who didn’t.

“However,” I continued, “as Professor Hirschur said, we will also need some information specific to Ehrenfest so that Dunkelfelger does not claim all of our research for themselves. To that end, we will add that, during the ritual, the magic circle must be filled entirely with mana, even if mednobles and laynobles must use rejuvenation potions to do so.”

“Rejuvenation potions?” Florencia repeated, blinking in surprise. As a member of the archducal family, she had probably never lacked the mana necessary to fill a magic circle.

“The magic circle for obtaining divine protections is large and complex, no? According to Professor Gundolf, laynobles and mednobles struggle to fill the entire thing with their mana, so they prioritize filling the parts with their elements instead. This way, they can secure the protection of the primary gods as long as they state the prayer correctly. Unless these students use rejuvenation potions, they will not be able to fill the circle completely and acquire protections outside of their elements.”

“This is my first time hearing this,” Florencia said, her eyes widening.

Incidentally, one’s curricula at the Royal Academy were dependent on one’s mana capacity. A lot of content was omitted from the laynobles’ lessons about rituals and such to accommodate their lack of mana.

“Furthermore, in Ehrenfest, we speak a prayer when replenishing the foundational magic, do we not?” I asked. “As it turns out, this is

not the case in other duchies. I expect that this is why Wilfried received so many divine protections. How were things done in Frenbeltag?"

"We did not pray either. I was surprised to see others doing it when I performed my first Mana Replenishment in Ehrenfest," Florencia replied. She had simply gone with the flow and stated the prayer while channeling her mana.

"It seems that Ehrenfest very well might be the only duchy that still prays during Mana Replenishment."

"You know, we haven't always done it," Sylvester interjected, his arms crossed and his brow furrowed.

"Wait, what?! It's not an age-old tradition?!" I exclaimed. "How far back does it go, then?"

"Father started it around the time Constanze was married into another duchy. I was a second- or third-year, as I recall."

"Does that mean you earned divine protections from gods other than the primary ones?" I asked, still surprised that the tradition was so new.

"I'm not sure if our praying was the reason but... yeah."

"Which ones did you get, Father?" Wilfried asked.

Sylvester merely sputtered in response, then his eyes wandered evasively around the room.

"Oh, Sylvester..." Florencia said with a teasing smile. "Your own son is asking; why not give him an answer?"

There was a pause before Sylvester finally conceded. "Liebeskhilfe and Glucklitat." The former was the mischievous, prank-loving Goddess of Binding, who stole threads from Dregarnuhr to bind men and women together, while the latter was the God of Trials, who granted good luck to those who overcame ordeals.

Hearing that Sylvester earned those protections in the Royal Academy, it becomes kind of obvious that he was all about romance. I'm sure he prayed just as sincerely as Philine does to Mestionora.

"In any case, Rozemyne," Florencia said, "can you tell me what you consider to be the more harmful areas of your research?"

"I am hoping to investigate whether students can use prayer and dedicate their mana to get more divine protections after coming of age. My retainers are now frequently visiting the temple, so I will test my theory on them."

Perhaps we could rescue Angelica, who had failed to obtain even the most basic divine protections in her student days. I was also curious to see if we could secure a few more for Damuel. Considering that Philine had received more protections, it was fully possible that those going to the temple would get more as well.

"Furthermore, I wish to test whether the ritual can successfully be

performed in duchy temples, rather than just at the Royal Academy. If all goes well, then we can secure more divine protections than any other duchy.” It would be a significant boon for us mana-wise if adults could obtain divine protections within Ehrenfest.

Sylvester stroked his chin, looking unconvinced. “So you say, but Ehrenfest doesn’t even know the magic circle necessary for the ritual. Unless... You haven’t made one, have you?”

“Not yet, but I drew the circle on my diptych during the ritual, so I will soon.”

I already had a drawing of the magic circle on hand; as long as I was careful, I was sure that I could recreate it. The process wouldn’t even take that long because, if we made it stealthily at home, we wouldn’t need to include all the fake lines to disguise it.

“But, wait... You have to stand at the center of the circle, and the fake lines and patterns would have made copying it down impossible. Especially for someone your height. How did you record it?”

The answer was simple: I had seen it from the top of the shrine, and the real parts of the circle had been shining with my mana. That didn’t make what I had done any more normal, though. Based on what Hirschur had told me, the statues moving aside and opening a path during the ritual was strange enough already. It was something that I absolutely needed to discuss with Ferdinand before telling anyone else.

“Rozemyne, how did you record it?” Sylvester asked again, leaning forward.

I worked my brain at full capacity in search of a way out of my current predicament. I needed to come up with a half-truth that wouldn’t land me in hot water if Ferdinand gave me permission to share what had actually happened.

“Th-The gods told me to!”

“What? *The gods*?”

“Yes. I heard them whisper to me,” I replied with a smile. “‘Write that circle down,’ they said.”

It wasn’t a complete lie; after all, they had made way for me to ascend the shrine. But since Sylvester—and every other person in the room, for that matter—was giving me a highly suspicious look, I moved to expertly change the subject.

“By the way, how did the purge go?”

In an instant, everyone widened their eyes and turned to the archducal couple. This news was of the utmost importance for those of us in the Royal Academy. We all wanted an explanation.

Sylvester’s expression hardened. “We sent word before, but the purge has finished, for now. We’ve eliminated those who had given their names and sworn loyalty to the first wife of another duchy, as

well as those who worked to bring misfortune to Ehrenfest. Those who have not given their names to anyone have been imprisoned and are currently under investigation.”

We all swallowed. According to Sylvester, they were busy with the cleanup—that being the investigations and carrying out the punishments. That was why Karstedt, as the knight commander, hadn’t been able to leave Ehrenfest to come here with Sylvester.

“As for those who gave their name and were executed, first were Giebe Gerlach and his family. Then there was...”

Sylvester went on to list those who had been executed for giving their name to Georgine. I recognized most of them as the people whom Matthias and Laurenz had warned us about. To my surprise, the head count was fewer than ten, even considering spouses and immediate family who were guilty by association. This news came as a great relief; at this rate, not many of the former Veronica faction children would need to give their names to survive.

“Thus, the only students who must give their names to save themselves are Matthias, Laurenz, Muriella, Barthold, and Cassandra,” Sylvester said. “I can’t yet make any guarantees for the others, but they should be able to return to their families.”

Barthold was planning to give his name to Wilfried, while Cassandra would give hers to Charlotte. The remaining three were giving theirs to me—which came as quite a surprise, considering what had been discussed.

“Unfortunately, Giebe Gerlach blew himself up,” Sylvester continued. “Bonifatius charged forward from the vanguard and attempted to restrain him with his schtappe, but the explosion came too quickly. I’m told that a single hand was the most that could be salvaged for evidence. The crest on its ring and the mana within confirmed it as belonging to the giebe, at least.”

I understood that Giebe Gerlach was Matthias’s father, but still—he had been loyal to Georgine and had continuously targeted me, so I was glad to hear that he was gone. It was safe to say that I, and all those close to me, were going to be much safer from now on.

“We will finish investigating our prisoners and settle their punishments while you are all at the Royal Academy,” Sylvester explained. “I expect that any students whose families are only receiving fines and such will be able to return home by the end of winter. The children of those who are receiving harsher punishments, such as long-term menial labor, will spend that time in the castle dormitory. This is also true for the children being housed in the orphanage.”

Matthias’s warning had resulted in the purge happening much earlier than was initially scheduled, but things had gone more or less

as planned. Most of the children who had been worried about never seeing their parents again would be reunited with them before long.

“How many children ended up in the orphanage?” I asked. “Have food and mattresses been delivered for them?”

“Yeah. Seems like Hartmut knew you would be worried about them; he’s been giving me regular reports on how they’re doing.”

Sylvester then turned to one of the scholars, who came forward and gave me a stack of documents. There were seventeen children who had ended up being sent to the orphanage, and a table had been drawn up detailing their names, ages, parents’ names, and what Wilma thought about them. As expected, many were emotionally unstable. Meanwhile, those who were five and six years old were gritting their teeth and refusing to show emotion, or otherwise fighting back the urge to cry—perhaps due to having been raised as nobles.

My heart ached at the thought of all those poor children, crying for their families. I understood that pain and sadness all too well, and memories of my separation from my own family flashed through my mind.

“And what of the playroom, Mother?” Charlotte asked.

“The children there were all gathered in one place, and, once the purge was complete, their families were allowed to come fetch them one by one,” Florencia replied. “The purge was carried out on such a large scale and involved many scholars and attendants, so having the children all in one place was convenient for protecting them.”

Subsequently, the children whose families had ended up being imprisoned and therefore hadn’t come for them were left in the playroom, where they discussed the purge and their futures. Only a small number would need to give their name to survive, and many conversations were had over what they should do next.

“And what happened to Nikolaus?” I asked.

Nikolaus was the son of Karstedt’s second wife, Trudeliede, and while we had barely spoken, he was still my half-brother. I had always been curious about the glances he gave me; it was like he wanted to say something but couldn’t.

“He is in the playroom,” Florencia informed me. “Karstedt said they will discuss his future once Trudeliede’s punishment has been decided. That said, Karstedt has much to do as a result of the purge, and he is going to hunt the Lord of Winter soon, so I expect that their conversation will not be for quite some time.”

He must be really scared...

As I thought about Nikolaus being all alone and afraid, Wilfried spoke up. “So, we know the purge is going as planned. Father... did you get to look into the memories of any of those name-sworn to Lady

Georgine?"

"Yeah. Several. Though there was nothing of any use."

Several of the name-sworn had apparently blown themselves up the moment they saw the Knight's Order approaching them. It would have been simple enough to kill them outright, but capturing them alive had been crucial to secure evidence and confirm their connection to Georgine. Of course, this was much easier said than done.

"Those who had given their name to my mother or just committed petty crimes put up some resistance, but, overall, they were captured without issue. As for those who gave their names to my sister... we weren't able to capture any of them properly, be it because they blew themselves up as soon as they saw the Knight's Order or because Bonifatius went a little too far when fighting them. We didn't get many heads we could search through."

Apparently, there were restrictions involved when it came to peering into the memories of the deceased. Back when Ferdinand had looked through mine during my days as a blue shrine maiden, he had given instructions so that I would show him what he wanted to see. You couldn't give instructions to the dead, though, and the memories of the deceased quickly degraded over time.

"On top of that, the memories that remained offered very little evidence," Sylvester continued. "We learned that Georgine visited Gerlach and that the two engaged in a crazed celebration over something she said, but I'm told that we still don't know what that 'something' was. The problem is that the vision and hearing of every person we've examined has been distorted, as if someone grabbed their memories and twisted them up."

"What in the world...?" I said. "Can you do that? Like, intentionally? Is there some restriction about peering into the memories of those who have given their name?" I needed to know, since I had already accepted some names myself.

Sylvester frowned. "Do you remember Matthias's report mentioning that the fireplace was lit despite it being summer, and the air was filled with a sweet scent?"

"I do. What about it?"

"A scholar who's an expert on drugs suspects that something called trug is to blame. It's a strong hallucinogenic plant that messes up one's memories. None grows in Ehrenfest, but students here at the Royal Academy are taught that it's very dangerous." Sylvester then let out a tired sigh. "My sister always comes thoroughly prepared; she obviously took several precautions to make sure that nothing can be traced back to her. I'm terrified by how obsessed she must be and how much she must have learned to accomplish her objective."

To think she had devised and enacted a plan to warp her name-

sworn vassals' memories, knowing full well what we would do to them when they were caught... I was much too careless to be able to manage such an intricate scheme—that is, assuming I could even come up with one in the first place. I couldn't help but wish that she would use her evident intellect for something more constructive than trying to steal someone else's duchy. The world was surely filled with so many more wonderful things.

Right. Like, she could try to construct a library, or gather all the stories in the world, or make new books.

I let out a weary sigh that was just like Sylvester's, finding Georgine's choice of obsession unfortunate. Meanwhile, Charlotte offered a gentle smile and words of consolation to her father, who was fighting for our duchy back at home.

"You may not have found concrete evidence within their memories, Father, but you still succeeded in eliminating those who had given their name to another duchy. That is more than enough, no? If not for that warning from Matthias, the purge might not have succeeded at all."

"Charlotte..." Sylvester said, staring at his daughter with an expression of surprise. She looked so much like her mother as she smiled softly back at him.

"Lady Georgine is no longer able to act freely in Ehrenfest. Giebe Gerlach has been executed, so even if she wishes to obtain the foundational magic, there is no longer anyone who can make the necessary arrangements for her. Thus, do not feel so down. We should now focus on unifying Ehrenfest. Is that not right?"

"Yeah. It is, Charlotte. We eliminated the vassals who were letting my sister act as she pleased. Moving forward, Ehrenfest is going to be safe for Rozemyne."

"Indeed. We've eliminated those who harmed my sister time and time again. That alone is enough," Charlotte said, her words softening the expression of not just Sylvester, but the knights who had accompanied the archducal couple as guards as well.

"Ehrenfest will probably experience a mana shortage for a while, since we've executed three giebels, but we're lucky enough to have a certain someone who's overflowing with mana. I might need to give my thanks and prayers to Glucklitat the God of Trials," Sylvester said, looking at me with a grin. He then beckoned over a knight, who stepped forward with a bag filled with feystones. "These should cover you for a while. Channel out all the mana that's built up inside of you and ease up on the compression. That should reduce your overall quantity down to a point where you can control it again."

I certainly hadn't expected to hear that kind of advice from Sylvester—and as I stared at him in surprise, his expression turned

wistful.

“This reminds me of when Ferdinand learned mana compression in his first year of school and completely overdid it. He was as puzzled as you are now when it became too much for him to control. In the end, he managed to resolve the issue by expending a ton of mana and compressing it less. From what I remember, anyway.”

His uncertainty left me feeling exceedingly concerned, but even so, his advice was highly valuable. I accepted the feystones with a smile.

“I thank you ever so much for the advice, Sylvester. I will give it a try.”

Finishing the Archduke Candidate Lessons

There were too many people gathered for us to clear the room and speak with Sylvester alone; instead, it seemed best for us to save the details about Roderick's name-swearing and acquisition of new elements for later. All of the students who needed to offer their names to survive had already finished the ceremony for obtaining blessings, so there was no need to hurry—it could even wait until this year at the Royal Academy was complete.

“That’s all that I’ve got for you,” Sylvester concluded. “Everyone, return to your rooms.”

I did as instructed, then started decompressing my mana by dumping it into feystones. I would need to stop unconsciously condensing it from this point on.

But compressing my mana is how I’m used to containing it.. Trying to picture it spread as wide and as thin as possible is tough unless I really concentrate.

During my commoner days, my very life had depended on how much I could compress my mana; only by pushing my vessel to its absolute limits had I managed to survive. Now, however, I needed to decompress and expend my mana so that I could actually regain some control over it.

“Oh...?”

As I continued to pour my mana into feystones, I was suddenly hit with the sensation of entering a state of flow, and a feeling like my body had gotten lighter. I instinctively understood this to be my schtappe’s limit, so I expended just a bit more mana.

“Okay. That should be enough,” I said.

I really hoped it would be.

The next day, after breakfast, we gathered the students in the common room to discuss the details of the purge. Everyone knew about the archducal couple visiting the dormitory, so there was a sea of very harsh faces. The children of the former Veronica faction looked especially tense; some were so pale that I had to wonder whether they were feeling light-headed.

“As everyone knows, the aub visited last night,” Wilfried said, exuding the utmost confidence as he began his explanation. “That was

because Professor Hirschur requested a meeting, but he took the opportunity to discuss the purge as well. I want to share what he told us with you all.”

He continued by saying that all those who had offered their name to Georgine, the first wife of another duchy, had been executed. The others were being interrogated, and their punishments would be decided during the winter.

“The following five students must offer their names to not be executed alongside their families: Matthias, Laurenz, Muriella, Barthold, and Cassandra. The others may return to their families, although not immediately.”

“Thank goodness...” sighed the first-year whom Leonore had restrained before. “I can endure the wait; I’m just glad that I’ll get to see my family again.” His words did wonders to brighten the atmosphere in the common room.

I was pleased that the first-year’s family hadn’t given their names to Georgine and relieved that only a select few students were having to give their names to us. However, in contrast to my comfort, Barthold and Cassandra looked worryingly unwell. They had lost their families, and now they were each having to surrender their life to another. I could see that they were giving forced smiles, and they must have realized this; the moment our eyes met, they quickly looked away, conscious that their true feelings weren’t hidden enough.

“The children in the orphanage are going to be handled as we described previously,” Wilfried continued. “Those whose families are only being fined as punishment will be returned home after the academic year, but those whose families are receiving more substantial punishments—that is, menial labor and the like—will stay in the castle dormitory until their sentence is up. Not all punishments have been set in stone, so keep this in mind.”

By the time the announcement was over, the children who had been worried about never seeing their families again were all wearing such genuine smiles. My retainers didn’t seem too dissatisfied either.

“Lady Rozemyne.”

I turned to the voice calling my name and saw that Matthias and Laurenz were making their way over. Leonore and my other guard knights slid forward, all with particularly cold expressions. Brunhilde and Lieseleta had their eyes narrowed, making for a very heavy atmosphere.

Matthias and Laurenz knelt before the wall of guards. “We have prepared our stones, Lady Rozemyne,” they said. “You may summon us whenever you are prepared to accept our names.”

“The sooner, the better, then,” I replied. “We cannot allow this tension between you and my guard knights to fester. Lieseleta, prepare

a room. Matthias, Laurenz, will you be okay with my retainers being in attendance?"

"Yes, my lady!"

My experience accepting Roderick's name was still fresh in my mind, so there was no need for me to make any further preparations. My guard knights all watched closely as Matthias was summoned to carry out the oath, then Laurenz. Both grimaced in pain the moment they were bound with my mana.

"You are both my retainers henceforth," I said. "I trust that you will serve me dutifully as guard knights."

"It is our honor, my lady."

Upon our return to the common room, Muriella let out a long sigh. "I would also like to give my name sooner rather than later, but I simply do not have good enough materials." She was giving Matthias and Laurenz envious looks and was clearly keeping her distance from me.

"We were thinking of getting ingredients for you next Earthday—with Lady Rozemyne's permission, of course," Matthias said.

I granted them my permission at once; it would be hard for those who had just lost their families to work alongside those rejoicing over their families having been spared. The sooner Muriella was made my retainer the better.

"Yes, please do," I said. "Now, Leonore... could you call Gretia over for me?"

"Wait, milady—what do you intend to say to her?" Rihyarda asked, fixing me with a hard glare.

"Hm? Well... I just intend to ask if she is still willing to serve me now that she no longer has to give her name."

My retainers all fervently shook their heads.

"Lady Rozemyne, Gretia's family is of the former Veronica faction. She cannot serve you without giving her name," Cornelius said.

"That's right, Lady Rozemyne. People will only think it's safe for her to serve you once she gives her name," Judithe agreed.

"Taking her as your retainer despite her faction would only reopen old wounds, and Gretia would suffer as a result," Leonore concluded.

I could only hang my head as everyone joined forces against me. "At the very least, could she not serve me exclusively in the Royal Academy, like Theodore?" I asked. "I am struggling because of a lack of student attendants, as you know."

Brunhilde and Lieseleta both fell into thought; I already had enough attendants in the castle, but the Royal Academy was another story. They understood better than anyone how important it was for them to train their successors... but even so, they ultimately refused

my suggestion with conflicted frowns.

“Those who serve archducal family members in the Royal Academy end up their closest vassals. Considering this future, I must protest the idea of Gretia serving as your retainer without first giving you her name.”

There was no fighting them on this matter. Matthias and Laurenz had their lives on the line here, but Gretia had a choice; I couldn't force her to give me her name. Roderick had said that name-swearing was a ritual wherein a person swore their loyalty and surrendered their very life to their true lord or lady. I really had to doubt that Gretia had the resolve to make such a sacrifice.

“Know to pick your battles, milady,” Rihyarda said. “Gretia cannot serve you unless she actively expresses her willingness to give her name.”

“Understood...”

I made my way to my morning archduke candidate lesson. My retainers were accompanying me, carrying my gold dust, city blueprints, and such, but they could only take me as far as the classroom. Rihyarda had on a worried expression as she handed me my things one by one.

“Milady, is this not too heavy for you? There is still the gold dust for you to carry...”

“I... I'm quite alright,” I replied. “These are my own belongings. I need to be able to carry them myself.”

In truth, the blueprints, gold dust, and feystones were quite a struggle for me to carry on my own. I was only having to bring them all at once because I had blasted ahead of the rest of the class. Pretty much everyone else would gradually bring in new items as they progressed through the course, meaning I was the only archduke candidate having to fight with my luggage.

“Give 'em here, Rozemyne. That's clearly too much for you to carry on your own,” Wilfried interjected. He wasted no time taking the feystone bag from me and the gold dust from Rihyarda.

“Thank you ever so much, Wilfried.”

I went past several rows of desks and the little gardens atop them on my way to my own workspace, where a stand was already in place. I set down the only thing I was carrying—my blueprints—while Wilfried set down the feystones and gold dust.

“Good day, Lady Rozemyne, Lord Wilfried.”

“Good day, Lady Hannelore.”

After we greeted my desk neighbor, Hannelore, Wilfried went off to speak with his own friend. I thanked him for his help as I watched him go, then Hannelore let out a small giggle.

“It really was kind of Lord Wilfried to carry your things for you,” she said, her eyes full of admiration. “I am envious that you have such a wondrous fiancé.”

I shook my head on instinct; our relationship certainly didn’t warrant any envy or admiration. “He only helped me with my luggage because my short stature put me at risk of getting buried under it all. Besides, I am sure Lord Lestilaut would help you if you were in a similar situation, no?”

Hannelore’s gaze suddenly became somewhat distant. “Um, well... yes, I imagine he would summon an attendant to assist me.”

So, in other words... he wouldn’t help you himself...?

“On a more important note, Lady Rozemyne, there is something I wish to ask you. Have you not been visiting the library lately? I was supplying mana to Schwartz and Weiss yesterday evening and was very surprised when they began calling me ‘milady.’”

“They... They did *what*?! ” I exclaimed. It seemed that Hannelore had taken Hortensia’s place as their new owner. “Um, a new archnoble librarian has been sent to the library, so I was told not to supply Schwartz and Weiss with any more mana until they were hers.”

“Um. Um... So, that means...”

“Professor Solange did say that she wanted you helpers to continue helping out, but did she not say anything while you were supplying the two shumils with your mana?” I asked.

There were two librarians now; surely one of them had been in the reading room. And for Hannelore to have supplied Schwartz and Weiss with enough mana to have become their new master, she must have been there long enough to have bumped into Hortensia. Solange absolutely would have said something.

“I was only there to provide my mana, and, erm... I was in too much of a rush to go to the reading room. To think the Academy has a new librarian—and one who’s in the process of taking over Schwartz and Weiss, at that...”

“Have your first-years not been registered yet?”

“I am told that is being done during today’s lunch break.”

Holy cow. Is it just me or is her timing terrible?!

“Did you not think to consult Professor Solange as soon as they started calling you ‘milady’?” I asked.

“To be honest, I did not consider it a very serious problem. I thought you would regain ownership as soon as you supplied them with your mana...”

We both cradled our heads as we grappled with the issue at hand—and it was then that a peculiar thought crossed my mind. Hannelore presumably had a great deal of mana as an archduke candidate of a greater duchy, but Hortensia was an archnoble from the Sovereignty;

if she was offering her mana each and every day, then it seemed strange that Hannelore had managed to overtake her so easily. Solange must not have expected a development like this either, else she would have simply asked us all to stop helping entirely.

“We will need to contact the library to get this resolved,” I said. “You did not mean any harm, Lady Hannelore, and the library did ask for your continued assistance, so I do not imagine this will go poorly.”

Eglantine then entered, and seeing her reminded me that the tools’ change in ownership had involved the royal family. On top of that, Hortensia was the first wife of the Sovereign knight commander; consulting Eglantine before we went to the library would probably be wise.

After starting the class and giving out today’s instructions, Eglantine came over to direct me, since I was ahead of everyone else. I took that opportunity to go all out.

“Um, Professor Eglantine, I have a question unrelated to the lesson,” I said. “The decision to change the master of the library’s magic tools was made by the royal family, correct? I recall that one member needed to be present when Professor Hortensia was selected as the new owner.”

Hannelore twitched. It was written on her face that she hadn’t known the royal family was involved.

“It seems that their current owner has...”

I went on to explain—and when I was done, Eglantine made a show of surprise. “Oh my. Lady Hannelore is their current owner?”

“My sincerest apologies,” Hannelore said at once, her face now pale. “I had no idea what was happening.”

“Indeed. Lady Hannelore did not have any bad intentions,” I added, doing my best to back her up.

“Yes, I can tell. She has provided a great deal of mana for the library’s sake, as you have. I understand why Professor Solange was so glad to have helpers.” She smiled. “Lady Hannelore, I thank you ever so much for the assistance you have so generously offered.”

The tension drained from Hannelore’s shoulders at once; she had actually been trembling in fear of getting scolded by a member of the royal family.

“Professor Eglantine,” I said, “hearing Lady Hannelore’s story made me a little curious—does Professor Hortensia not have as much mana as one would expect? I would have thought that, if she were donating mana to Schwartz and Weiss every day, then Lady Hannelore would never have been able to take control, no matter how excellent of an archduke candidate she may be.”

“But the library has so many magic tools,” Hannelore interjected. “I imagine that Professor Hortensia has simply chosen to prioritize

others for the time being.”

I cocked my head in thought; Schwartz and Weiss were more or less invaluable when it came to library work, so it was hard to imagine them being set aside for other magic tools. Plus, the royal family was openly pushing for this change of ownership, so surely that was Professor Hortensia’s highest priority.

“I thank you both ever so much for your concern, Lady Rozemyne, Lady Hannelore,” Eglantine said. “I am told that, in the past, the library needed three archnoble librarians at the very least. There must be a limit to how much one person can do with their mana. I will consult the library to confirm that all is well.”

“Thank you, Professor Eglantine,” I replied. “Should, um... Prince Hildebrand be informed too?” He was here at the Royal Academy as a member of the royal family, and his pouty remark about how he could have overseen the transfer on his own had immediately come to mind.

“Fear not,” Eglantine assured me. “I will keep him updated.”

That was that, then; with her help, I could ensure that my contact with the royal family was kept to a minimum.

“This discussion has been immensely helpful, Professor Eglantine,” Hannelore said. “I was unaware that this matter involved the royal family. Had I reported this myself, they might have summoned me to a meeting. It would have thrown my parents and so many others into such a panic.”

A wave of guilt washed over me. “I have the most opportunities to see Lady Hannelore, so I should have informed her of what happened. My apologies.”

“Oh, no. I should have gone to the reading room and greeted the librarians.”

“That is enough, you two,” Eglantine said, giggling at our back-and-forth. “The greatest fault lies with the library for not contacting its helpers. This is nothing for you to worry so much about.”

“Professor Eglantine... I imagine this will not be relevant for some time, but...”

I went on to explain the research we were doing into the divine protections ritual, then used that opportunity to inform Hannelore that we were hoping for Dunkelfelger’s assistance.

“Ehrenfest doing research with Dunkelfelger?” they asked in unison, their eyes equally wide.

“Yes,” I replied, then turned my attention back to Hannelore. “I am told that many of your duchy’s apprentice knights obtain multiple divine protections, and we would sincerely appreciate your help to demonstrate circumstances outside of Ehrenfest. As I am aware, the royal family also considers it important that nobles obtain the divine protections of as many gods as possible.”

Of course, I was hinting ever so lightly that Anastasius pushed for us to do exactly that through his official advice.

"I am sure that Professor Rauffen is already familiar with this matter," I continued. "We believe that, if we are going to learn about Dunkelfelger's long-standing traditions and organize them as research, then it would be ideal for our two duchies to publish our findings together. Naturally, I am not asking for a response here and now; I imagine you will first need to speak with your aub, so I can wait until a future tea party."

"Understood," Hannelore replied. "I will consult our aub."

Now that we had settled all of our royal-family-related matters, I presented Eglantine with the blueprints I had prepared for class. She examined them for a moment and then said, "Lady Rozemyne, do you intend to turn the entire city into a library?"

"That is correct," I declared, my chest puffed out. "Such is my ideal city."

Eglantine gave a wry smile and muttered, "Perhaps, but I cannot say it is very realistic..."

That face she's making... Why does she look like a mother hesitating to crush her daughter's nonsensical dreams?!

I needed to do something—and with that in mind, I started to explain the architectural philosophy behind my blueprints.

"Actually, I think you will find that my city is very realistic indeed. For one, there is proper zoning. The roads and port on the left make up the mercantile district, where books can be bought from and sold to other lands. On the right is the production district, where our own books can be made. This zone here is for entertainment, with inns and restaurants for those visiting the library, and—"

"Now then, shall we begin?"

She cut me off with a smile?!

"Please follow me, Lady Rozemyne," Eglantine continued. She then led me to the back of the classroom and into a smaller room that contained only a magic circle. "Fill this circle with mana, if you would. Once that is done, you will be graced with the names of the God of Darkness and the Goddess of Light."

"Wait, really?" I asked. "The divine names of the supreme gods?" What was this about me being graced with the names of the gods instead of them being taught to me?

"It turns out that the supreme gods do not have a singular name," Eglantine explained. "There is a tale of a researcher from a time long ago who, in an attempt to learn these names, sought the help of an archduke candidate who had already been granted the privilege. The researcher found the answer he had so desired, only to be engulfed in flames of Light and Darkness and disappear entirely. Meanwhile, the

archduke candidate who had abetted him lost their divine protections and was no longer able to receive the gods' blessings, even when using their names in chant. They were ultimately demoted to an archnoble."

What the heck?! That's terrifying!

"I am going to be in the other room," Eglantine concluded.

"Return once you have learned their names—and take great care that nobody hears you repeat them."

"Understood," I replied with a nod. Even when tutoring me, Ferdinand had been very careful not to tell me the names of the supreme gods. I had wondered why at the time, but now I realized that he had been trying to keep me from dying a horrible death by multi-elemental fire.

After confirming that Eglantine was gone, I knelt atop the magic circle, pressed my hands against it, and assumed the usual praying pose. "I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world..."

The magic circle wasn't very large, but it didn't seem to be filling up at all—not even when I poured, and poured, and poured my mana into it.

I should have waited until after class to dump all of my mana. My timing is pretty bad too, I guess.

Keeping one hand on the magic circle, I grasped at my hip and took one of my kindness-filled rejuvenation potions, which I then downed in one go. I continued to pour mana into the circle... and, eventually, a voice began to speak in my head. The names of the supreme gods appeared in my mind with a blast of radiant fire, as though light were searing every letter directly into my brain.

Schicksantracht the God of Darkness... and Versprechredi the Goddess of Light.

The names of the gods were normally so long and such a struggle to remember, but with these two burned directly into my brain, I was confident that I would never, ever forget them.

"O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, Schicksantracht the God of Darkness and Versprechredi the Goddess of Light..." I muttered on instinct.

Not even a beat later, my schtappe appeared in my right hand, all on its own. It happened so suddenly that I couldn't help but cry out.

"Eep!"

My schtappe then rose up into the air and began sucking up the golden flames and black darkness now emanating from the magic circle. Even though it was no longer in my hands, it must have still been connected to me, as I could feel the mana flowing into my body. It wasn't necessarily unpleasant—probably because it was my own mana going back into me—but it was certainly... strange.

I wish you had told me things were going to be this weird ahead of time, Lady Eglantine!

As I made my silent protest, the last of the light was sucked into my schtappe, and the magic circle became dull in appearance once again.

“Is that it...?” I asked myself.

I must have spoken too soon, as golden light and black darkness immediately shot out of my schtappe and came together in a tremendous helix. It rose high into the air until it eventually passed straight through the ceiling and out of sight.

“Bwuuh?! ”

In an instant, all the mana that had flowed into me and almost all the mana left in my body was sucked out. The change came so suddenly that I wasn’t even able to stay on my knees; the next thing I knew, I was flat on the ground. My vision flashed white as though I were experiencing blood loss, which spurred me to reach for and chug another of my kindness-filled rejuvenation potions.

As I stayed on the ground, waiting to recover, Eglantine’s worried voice reached me through the door. “Lady Rozemyne, it has been quite some time. Are you okay?”

“I expended too much mana and had to use some rejuvenation potions,” I replied. “It may take me a short while to recover. Could you wait a bit longer for me to be able to move?”

“You cannot move?” she asked, now sounding more panicked. “May I open the door?”

“I would rather you not.” I could already hear chatter rising behind the door, and the last thing I wanted was for everyone to witness me slumped on the ground, unable to move. No archduke candidate would want to be seen in such a state. “If you can give me just a moment then I will recover on my own.”

“Rozemyne, it’s me,” came another voice—one that I immediately recognized as Wilfried. “Did you collapse?”

“I just ran out of mana. I drank a kindness-filled rejuvenation potion, so I should be able to move again soon.”

“So this is just another one of your episodes?” he asked, sounding a lot more understanding. “Alright.” I then heard him step away from the door; it seemed that he was consoling Eglantine and telling her that she didn’t need to worry.

“I... think I should be okay now?”

I shook my legs awake, then slowly stood up. It seemed that I could indeed move again. After smoothing down my skirt and combing through my somewhat disheveled hair with my fingers, I stepped out of the room.

“Lady Rozemyne, are you well...?” Eglantine asked.

“I am quite alright,” I replied. “It just took me some time to recover from having used so much mana at once. More importantly, I have learned the names of the supreme gods. What is the next step of the lesson?” I made sure to give a big smile as I spoke, hoping to convince her that I could finish the rest of the lesson without incident.

Eglantine gave a resigned sigh before carrying my garden into the small room. I was going to be staying in there so that the others wouldn’t hear the names of the supreme gods, apparently.

“Now then... let us perform an *entwickeln*,” Eglantine said. “This is the magic circle. *Entwickeln* will require all elements.”

I already knew that much; Ferdinand had hammered it all into me during our tutoring sessions. I needed to chant “*stylo*” to transform my *schtappe*, draw a magic circle in the air with my mana, and then add some gold dust. Once that was done, I would need to chant a spell while adding my blueprints. The paper they were drawn on was a type of magic tool brewed out of mana.

“Take care to draw the magic circle large so that you do not overlook any mistakes,” Eglantine noted. “After that, adjust its size such that it fits the size of your buildings.” She handed me a list of written instructions, then exited the room.

I performed *entwickeln* as per the sheet that Eglantine had given me, constructing my ideal city within the garden. From this angle, it looked just like when Ferdinand had made the monastery, albeit on a much smaller scale.

“Professor Eglantine!” I called. “I’m done!”

“Oh my. You finished in one go? Let us make the border gate, then.”

Eglantine placed an example garden next to mine so that we could practice. Border gates were a joint effort; they could only be made with the approval of the archdukes of two neighboring duchies. Both parties were essentially using magic circles to create and then preserve a hole in the barrier between their lands.

“Border gates are left open so that they can be passed through,” Eglantine said, “but as country gates can only be opened with the permission of the king and the aub, they are generally left closed. Ehrenfest has a country gate on its east side, I believe? Have you seen it before?”

“No, but I will soon be visiting Kirnberger, where our country gate is located. I intend to see it then.”

After safely making my garden’s border gate, I was done with my archduke candidate lesson. I had completed it about as quickly as anyone could.

Passing Professor Gundolf's Classes

"You finished this class very quickly, Lady Rozemyne," Eglantine said. "I am truly surprised. Would it be safe to invite you to a tea party now, perhaps?"

I already knew what my response was going to be: absolutely not. I had been told to avoid the royal family as much as possible. Besides, I wanted my next tea party to be with Dunkelfelger; we had our joint research to discuss, plus I still needed to speak with Clarissa.

"My sincerest apologies, but I must begin taking the scholar course," I said. "A tea party in the near future will not be feasible."

"I see. In that case, we may have one after you have completed the scholar course."

I nodded with a smile, then exited the classroom. Now that I was done with my third-year archduke candidate classes, my aim was to dive straight into the scholar course. I returned to my chambers, whereupon I sent letters to one professor of the scholar course after another; prioritizing the archduke candidate course meant that I hadn't been able to attend the first day of the scholar course or take its tests, so I was having to schedule separate retakes.

I need to finish soon; otherwise, I'll miss my chance to have a tea party with Dunkelfelger.

My initial goal for this academic year had been to finish the magic tools that I wanted for my library, but now it was to complete a joint research project about divine protections. I was about to be very busy, so I wanted to finish my classes as soon as possible.

The scholar course was made up of several classes that were compulsory for all students, including the making of magic tools, in-depth magic circle studies, and learning to read old literature. As well as these, however, there were also several classes that one could take according to one's own preferences. These were a lot more specialized, with examples including how to gather information or how to pretty much become a doctor, among other things. Naturally, Ferdinand already had taught me the content of every single one, meaning I would be able to secure passing grades in them all unless something disastrous happened.

Please let the professors have spare time.

Professors wouldn't allow retakes unless they were free, so I could only pray to the gods...

And it seemed that my prayers were answered, as I soon received a response from Gundolf. He led three lessons on the scholar course, and I wanted to use this opportunity to finish all of them.

“I thank you ever so much for taking time out of your busy day for me, Professor Gundolf.”

“Ah, Lady Rozemyne. Right this way.”

Dressed in my brewing clothes and with Philine and Roderick carrying the ingredients I needed, I stepped into Gundolf’s laboratory in the scholar building. I recalled that Hirschur’s laboratory had been an absolute mess—and this was no different. Perhaps it was just a universal truth that the only clean part of a laboratory was the brewing area; everywhere else was covered with papers.

“So, shall we begin?” Gundolf asked.

All students took a practical class for separating mana, but the scholar course was a bit more advanced; it began with splitting mana according to its elements and then creating materials that suited it. I had taken Sylvester’s advice and decompressed my mana, so I could now brew with my schtappe without incident.

I thank you ever so much, Sylvester!

And so, I started putting ingredients into the brewing pot to make the assigned potions. Gundolf watched me carefully all the while, stroking his beard. I was very well accustomed to brewing at this point, but one-on-one examinations like this were still surprisingly tense.

“I see that you even use the time-saving magic circle, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Ferdinand taught me how. My body is so weak that I often need to use rejuvenation potions, but brewing for long periods is a struggle for someone of my size. This circle allows me to make the potions as regularly as I need them.”

Plus, I was trying to finish several classes all at once here. I couldn’t afford *not* to use the time-saving circle.

“You make your own potions?” Gundolf asked.

“I do. Ferdinand was adamant that I at least learn the process, and, thanks to that, I am not suffering a shortage in his absence,” I said with a smile. “I cannot count on my guardians forever.”

Gundolf met my response with a frown. “That is not what I meant. Archduke candidates are supposed to leave brewing to their retainer scholars. There is much that an archduke candidate needs to prioritize over brewing their own potions, is there not?”

Wait... what?! Brewing is scholar work?! This is my first time hearing that!

I had always assumed that brewing one’s own potions was normal

—Ferdinand would always make mine for me and say that it would be shameful for me not to be able to produce my own. On the contrary, however, a normal archduke candidate would apparently leave any brewing to their scholars.

I thought about leaving my potion-making to Philine and Roderick, then shook my head. I could entrust such a duty to Hartmut, but those two wouldn't be able to endure it. Not at all.

"The potions that Ferdinand made for me are a special brew," I explained. "They require so much mana, as well as rare ingredients, that even archnobles would only barely be able to make them."

"What potions are those, then?"

"The recipe's a secret," I replied. "Oh, I'm done. Will this do?" I directed Gundolf's attention to the finished potion, hoping to change the focus of our conversation.

After just a brief glance, Gundolf nodded and gave me a passing grade. "You brewed with thoroughly experienced motions, had completely stable mana despite using the time-saving magic circle, and did not fail in any measure. Continue brewing the other potions with equal excellence."

"Right!"

I swiftly moved on to the next potion, chatting with Gundolf while I brewed. He was most interested in the divine protections ritual and asked many questions on the subject.

"I am afraid that I cannot answer these of my own will," I said. "The royal family has involved themselves in this business, and we plan to publish our results during the Interduchy Tournament. We have already consulted Lady Hannelore, and, with Dunkelfelger's permission, we are going to have this be joint research."

I was trying to use the authority of a top-ranking duchy to prevent any further questioning from Gundolf, but—

"Would it not have been more efficient for you to collaborate with Drewanchel...?"

"We would have if we were focusing on magic tools or circles, but Drewanchel does not seem to have any students who obtained multiple divine protections."

"Hmm... In that case, shall we do joint research on magic tools?"

He was as persistent as ever, it seemed. I shook my head in response to his invitation for me to join him and said in my firmest voice, "I have decided to join Professor Hirschur's laboratory."

I already had plans for Hirschur to keep a lot of secrets, and, as she was Ehrenfest's dormitory supervisor, we wouldn't need to worry about our research being stolen by another duchy. Most of all, Raimund also being in the laboratory would make it easier for me to contact Ferdinand and work on developing more magic tools. There

were still a bunch that I wanted for my library, although I hadn't given up on my plan to make a sound-recording magic tool that I could stuff with reproofs for Ferdinand.

"But Hirschur's laboratory doesn't... Er, rather, my laboratory has better funding and higher-quality ingredients."

"That is nice, but I am not lacking in funding at the moment," I said. Gundolf may have opted for a more tactful approach, but I was perfectly capable of reading between the lines; Hirschur was probably struggling for money as a result of receiving no assistance from her home duchy. Ferdinand had said something about supporting her himself, but I doubted that Hirschur would fully take him up on the offer. Maybe it would be best for me to compensate her for letting me stay in her laboratory.

To be honest, she needs food and sleep more than she needs money.

"How unfortunate. Your ideas are often extraordinarily unique, Lady Rozemyne. They would have been excellent stimuli for my research," Gundolf said, finally surrendering with a look of regret. The fact that he knew when to give up, just as Ferdinand had said, made me like him a little bit more.

"I am interested in magic tool paper," I said. "Once I am in a position to spend time researching it, I would very much like to collaborate with Drewanchel."

"Oho. Magic tool paper... Such as which feybeast skin is most suitable for making it?"

"No, I wish to look into whether such paper can be made from materials other than feybeast skin."

There was a sudden glimmer in Gundolf's eyes, and an intrigued smile spread across his face. "I see. Drewanchel would certainly be better suited for research of that manner than Dunkelfelger. I look forward to working with you."

"That said, I am going to be too busy for us to collaborate this year."

Gundolf gave me a confused look. "Can you not instruct someone to work in your place? You are far from Ehrenfest's only scholar, and it seems unreasonable for an archduke candidate to manage an entire duchy's research single-handedly. That you would take matters into your own hands makes sense for your research into divine protections, as the royal family is involved with that, but why must you do the same here?"

I stared at him in shock, the scales at last falling from my eyes. It hadn't even occurred to me that I could dump this research on other people.

"As you are an archduke candidate, the development of your duchy should be your main focus," Gundolf continued. "You are

taking the scholar course, so you will need to carry out some personal research as well, but you must differentiate between that which cannot progress without you and that which can, else you will never make any progress in either. Your attention is currently being torn between many interesting subjects. I would suggest that you delegate the bulk of your research to other scholars, making sure to direct them and oversee their progress, and think about how to best utilize their results. At the very least, this is how we do things in Drewanchel.”

I was trying to do everything myself rather than raising other scholars as an archduke candidate should. In other words, I was doing the same thing that Ferdinand always did.

“I would also recommend that you do this paper research with Drewanchel,” Gundolf said. “I am very confident in our selection of quality ingredients.”

“That sounds wonderful. Ehrenfest is still lacking in that area.”

“The many years I’ve spent as a Royal Academy professor have also graced me with a great many tools for brewing. Recreating the research results of the not-so-distant past is far from out of the question for me.”

I broke into a smile. “Now you really have my attention. I have taken an interest in the lessons of the past—particularly those held in the days when students did not receive their schtappes during their first year.”

“Hm, hm... Few professors remain from the generation when schtappes were obtained during one’s graduation.”

“There are study guides of past students available in the library but no work documents of the professors, so one can only get a vague idea of the lessons that took place back then. Tell me, what was taught in what years? I would very much like instructional material written from a professor’s perspective.”

“This can be discussed during our research.”

“Truly? Oh my... I’m looking forward to it.”

I was ultimately convinced, so it was decided that Ehrenfest and Drewanchel would research magic tool paper together. The rest of our time was focused on my retakes, wherein I passed one written and two brewing lessons. Once I was done, I made my way back to the Ehrenfest common room to report my results.

“So, basically, we’re going to be doing a joint research project with Drewanchel as well.”

“How does this keep happening?!” Wilfried exclaimed. The look of complete outrage he was giving me was entirely unwarranted, in my opinion. How could anyone fault me for something as harmless as telling Gundolf that I wanted to research paper and indicating that I wanted the instructional materials of past professors? It had only been

by a fortunate coincidence that we had entered this mutually beneficial arrangement.

“You and Charlotte are assisting with printing and paper-making at the moment, no?” I asked. “I must ask you to pivot into researching something for me—the extent to which paper made from our duchy’s feyplants can be turned into magic tools, how this paper can be used, and such. Does this not sound more appropriate for Ehrenfest?”

Ignaz and Marianne exchanged glances.

“Rozemyne,” Wilfried said, “do you intend to get Charlotte’s and my scholars involved in your research?”

“But of course. Philine and Roderick are busy gathering and writing stories, and they are going to be essential to our research into divine protections, considering the results of their rituals. I also consider this an excellent opportunity to show everyone that you and Charlotte are just as involved in the printing and paper-making industries as I.”

Keeping all the praise for myself was far from ideal. If we wanted to get rid of Sylvester’s reputation as a cruel archduke who only forced work onto his half-brother and adopted daughter, then it was necessary for his blood-related children to demonstrate that they had jobs as well and were working hard to complete them.

“Now, do not misunderstand me—I am not saying that scholars who are already busy should drop their current research for my sake. Rather, I simply believe that the retainers of our archduke candidates should make printing and paper-making their primary focus, as these are Ehrenfest’s core industries now.”

“And what if our apprentice scholars refuse?”

I turned to look at Muriella, who was due to become my retainer after giving me her name. She was reading one of Elvira’s books with a dreamy expression.

“I will put Muriella in charge of the research and give the work to the apprentice scholars of the former Veronica faction,” I said. “They no longer need to give us their names, so most of them will not become our retainers, but their futures can still change for the better if they demonstrate their value in researching our duchy’s largest industries.”

The families who had avoided execution were still considered criminals, so, upon returning to Ehrenfest, any students of the former Veronica faction were bound to receive harsh looks from those who thought them guilty by association. If these students could demonstrate their worth to the duchy, however, then I was sure that the adults would soften up to them at least a little over time.

“Hm...”

“If your and Charlotte’s apprentice scholars are to be put in charge

instead, then I would suggest that you have Barthold and Cassandra give their names sooner rather than later,” I said. “If all goes well, then this work should strengthen their bonds with your other retainers, and their connections should secure us help from the former Veronica faction’s apprentice scholars as well.”

Wilfried turned to Ignaz, who was standing next to him. “What do you think? Do you have anything else you’re researching?”

“No, I am still debating what to focus on for my graduation. I think I would appreciate the opportunity that Lady Rozemyne has proposed, though; it will surely benefit us both.”

“Got it,” Wilfried replied with an affirming nod. “Rozemyne, we’ll put Ignaz and Barthold at the center of this paper research.”

“Do not forget my retainers, Brother,” Charlotte interjected. “Marianne, would you be willing?”

Marianne smiled. “Yes, of course, Lady Charlotte.” And, with that, our problems were solved; we were going to be able to collaborate with Drewanchel after all.

“First things first, though—we’re going to need those students to give us their names,” Wilfried said.

“I am going to the gathering spot with my retainers this Earthday to get materials for Muriella,” I noted. “Perhaps you could have your guard knights join them for Barthold and Cassandra? A scholar and an attendant cannot be expected to get suitable materials for a name-swearing on their own.”

Plus, now that the children of the former Veronica faction were distancing themselves a bit from those who intended to give their names, it was important that Wilfried and Charlotte recognize their obligation to start supporting their soon-to-be retainers.

“Your eyes are as sharp as ever, Sister,” Charlotte said. “Natalie, go ask Cassandra her plans for next Earthday. I wish to invite her to join those gathering materials.”

After watching Natalie, Charlotte’s guard knight, leave the common room, Wilfried told Alexis to speak with Barthold. Everyone was now accounted for... but as I started to relax, Gretia called Judithe to a secluded spot in the room. They appeared to be discussing something.

“Um, Lady Rozemyne...” Judithe said when she returned, looking conflicted.

“Yes?”

“Gretia just said that she also wants to go to the Earthday gathering... so that she can give her name too.”

“Wait, what? But...”

As I recalled, Gretia’s family had managed to avoid punishment; there was no obligation for her to give her name to anyone.

“Rihyarda, it seems that Gretia has something to say to us,” I said.
“May we?”

“You have enough guard knights present, so... yes, you may.”

Gretia's Circumstances and Gathering Ingredients

I asked for a separate room to be prepared, then made my way there with Gretia. She was a fourth-year, the same as Judithe, which made her one year older than me. Everyone in their grade had worked together back when they were in their second year and the Better Grades Committee was first established, so they were closer with each other than they were with their seniors. That might have explained why Gretia was almost hiding behind Judithe. It was rare to see a noble acting timid so openly.

Gretia always wore her gray hair in a large braid that reached down her back. It was very similar to how Lieseleta wore hers, except that Gretia took care to ensure that not a single strand was out of place. She was dressed in particularly bland clothes, which I assumed was so that she wouldn't stand out—but, unfortunately for her, she had developed shockingly well for a young woman her age, so my eyes were naturally drawn to her chest.

“Gretia,” I said.

“Y-Yes?” she replied. Our conversation had barely even started, but it was already apparent that she was something of a gloomy shut-in. She was maintaining a neutral expression, but her voice was quavering and she was clasping her hands together.

“I heard from Judithe that you wish to give me your name.”

“Yes, my lady. Please accept my request.”

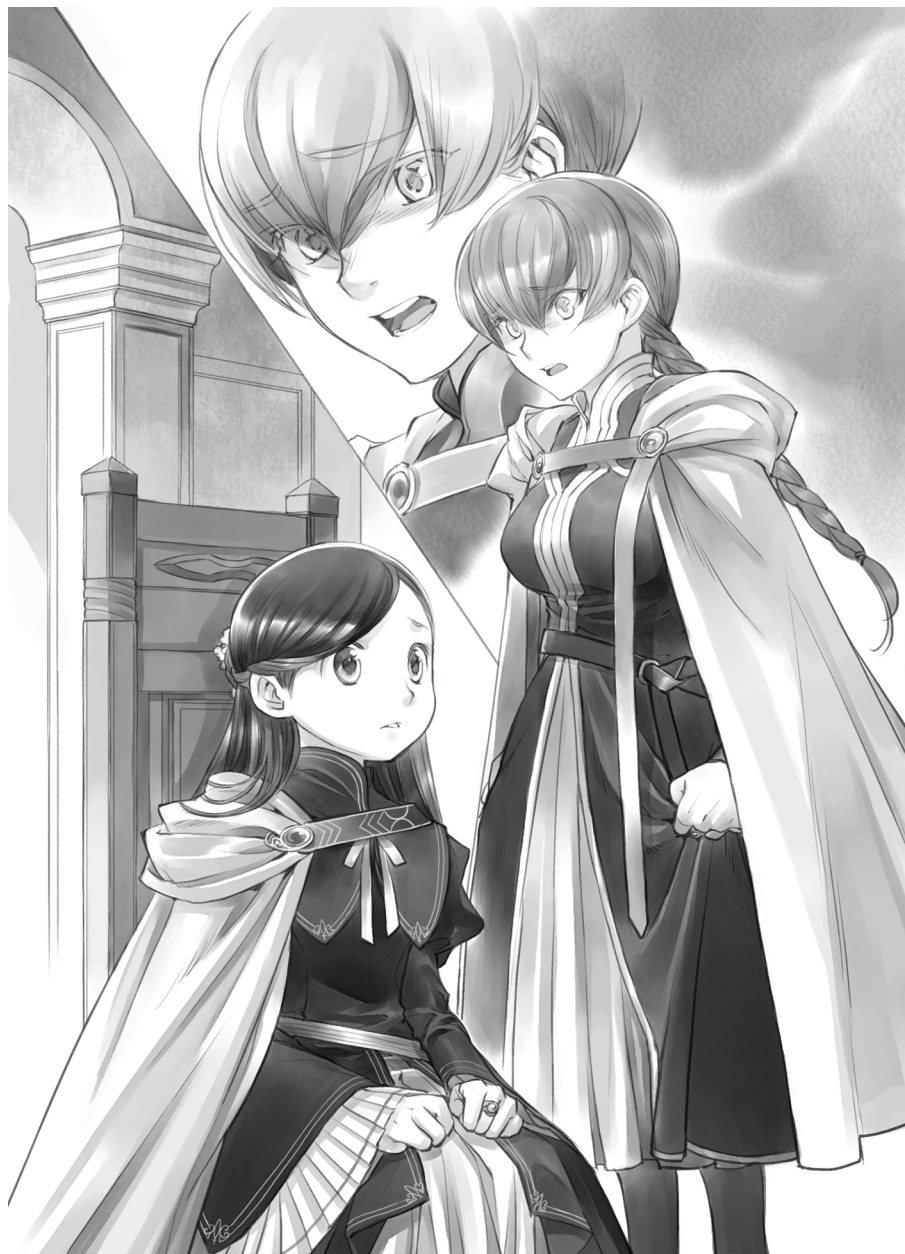
“I wish to hear your reasoning before anything else. There is no need for you to take such action, is there?”

Gretia looked at Matthias and Laurenz with wavering eyes, then looked down at her feet. “I want a guardian...” she finally said.

“A guardian? You wouldn't need to...”

I stopped mid-sentence. The children of the former Veronica faction certainly couldn't become retainers without first giving their names.

“This is... my only chance,” Gretia said, shooting her head up and staring at me in desperation. Her eyes had thus far been hidden by her bangs, so this was my first time seeing them properly. They were a pleasant bluish-green.



“This is my only hope,” Gretia stressed.

“I’m sorry, but... I don’t understand,” I said.

Gretia pressed her lips together, then took out a sound-blocking magic tool. “I don’t want others to know about my family circumstances.”

I gave Rihyarda a look, silently conveying my question of whether it was safe for me to comply. In response, she directed Brunhilde to inspect the magic tool for any danger. My retainers were now extra sensitive about what I touched, owing to our previous incident, so she checked it over thoroughly for poison or any dangerous magic circles. It was all done so smoothly that I couldn’t help but marvel at how quickly my retainers had adapted.

After finishing her checks, Brunhilde handed me the sound-blocking magic tool. Meanwhile, Gretia was watching me carefully, wanting to confirm that I was firmly grasping the tool. Her confession really must have been one that she didn’t want others to hear.

“I was... born in the temple,” she eventually admitted.

“Wha?”

“I’m the daughter of a blue priest and a blue shrine maiden. At least, that’s what I’ve always been told.”

I could only listen in a daze as Gretia continued her completely unexpected story. It had all started before the country-wide purge, she said—before the temple had experienced its mana shortage, when there were still many blue priests and shrine maidens. Hearing the words “blue priest” had consistently brought images of old men without much mana to my mind, but, apparently, that trend hadn’t always existed.

According to Gretia, during these older days of the temple, a blue shrine maiden and a blue priest of mednoble origins had fostered a secret romance. They had attempted to keep their relationship a secret, only for everything to be revealed when the shrine maiden became pregnant.

“They couldn’t get married due to being in the temple,” Gretia explained. “My birth mother asked if she and the priest could return to their respective families and marry there, but she was mocked for making a request so far above her station. She was sent back home in the end, but she was considered a disgrace and confined to a side building. I’m told that my birth mother never saw the blue priest whom she loved again.”

Gretia had ended up being raised in this side building until she was baptized—and, all the while, her birth mother had grumbled about how much better her life had been before she was burdened with a child.

“Before she became pregnant with me, my birth mother received support from her family and subsidiary payments from the archduke. She had been pampered when traveling across the provinces for rituals, receiving money and gifts. Loyal gray priests and shrine maidens had served as her attendants—a stark contrast to the guards she had received in the side building—and she had apparently been very happy with the man she loved. That is, before I was born and ruined everything...”

The purge and mass exodus to the Sovereignty had then occurred, leaving each duchy with a considerable lack of nobles and spurring the integration of temple children back into noble society. Gretia had spent her entire life up to that point being raised to be a servant, but the circumstances had resulted in her mana being measured. The next thing she knew, her birth mother’s older brother and his first wife had taken her as their daughter so that they could use her for a political marriage.

“They baptized me, so they became my parents... but not once have they shown me even the slightest trace of warmth or affection,” Gretia continued. “They simply told me again and again not to embarrass myself or disgrace them as my mother had, since I was a tool to be used for political gain.” She gripped her skirt tightly. “My brothers only ever call me ‘the temple girl’ and mock my gray hair, saying that it makes me look like an old woman... and, when my body started to develop at an earlier age than most, they teased me for being a cow. I’ve never known peace.”

This was my first time speaking with someone else who had effectively laundered the circumstances of their birth through a baptism. It was also my first time learning that those baptized into another family were sometimes treated much, much worse than their new parents’ actual children.

Mother sure is something else for looking after me as she does her actual children...

She had prepared my chambers, ensured that several baptismal outfits were made for me, and taken care to educate me into a proper archnoble girl. My older brothers had never bullied me; in fact, on the contrary, my entire family had always done everything in their power to keep me safe. I expected that this would have been the case even if the archduke hadn’t adopted me.

“My family is from a mednoble house,” Gretia said. “We don’t make the plans in our faction; we’re just expected to execute them. Political marriages play an important role in keeping the house secure, with daughters being married off as second or third wives. But I never felt bad about that.”

Gretia wanted to leave her family and start being treated as a

regular noble, whether through a political marriage or otherwise. She didn't even mind if she married a man old enough to be her father. Escaping her current situation would at least keep her from being called "the temple girl."

"Being forced to offer my name was like the gods extending their hands to save me," Gretia continued. "It was a chance to finally renounce that 'family' and serve a lord or lady of my own choosing. To that end, I thought that the Saint of Ehrenfest, who shows compassion even to orphans as the High Bishop, wouldn't think anything about me being born to a shrine maiden. I thought that she—that you—would accept me for who I am."

Gretia believed that she wasn't skilled enough to work as my attendant, but knowing that she could focus on private rather than public work had apparently brought her great peace of mind.

"But, in the end, my parents were able to avoid execution. Upon hearing this news, my only thought was that I could no longer put on a sad face and give my name to you without any problems," Gretia said, having internally despaired while all the other children of the former Veronica faction were rejoicing. "I am fully confident that, even if my father wasn't executed, he still committed grave crimes. Someone else may have come up with the plans and given him his orders, but I saw him struggling with the fact that he couldn't refuse to carry them out."

Gretia sighed and continued, "I can't imagine anyone would want to marry the daughter of a serious criminal. Rather than finding someone who will treat me well, my parents will desperately try to pair me off with anyone who can improve their status. I was belittled so much at home that I've developed a talent for reading the expressions of others and imagining the worst-case scenario... and, as I see it, my chances of a pleasant life are practically nonexistent."

Her eyes downcast, Gretia went on to explain that, when she had been celebrating the opportunity to give her name, the worst-case scenario she had envisioned was her family surviving. She considered it just her luck that it had come true.

"Gretia, to give someone your name is to put your very life in their hands," I said. "If your lord or lady falls, then so do you. Of course, I will do my best to ensure that such a thing never happens, but there is no guarantee that I won't end up traversing the same path as Lady Veronica, who lost her power and was imprisoned. Not to mention, there are many areas in which I am lacking as a guardian. Have you considered all that carefully?" I couldn't shake the feeling that she was seeing me through rose-tinted glasses and ignoring the demerits that would come from serving me.

"I have heard everything from Roderick and Judithe. You treat

even your commoner musician and chefs with respect, no? And you have made arrangements such that Roderick never has to see his family. I am confident that my decision here is the right one.” Gretia gave a small smile and then added, “I am an apprentice attendant, after all. I can gather the information I need.”

Gretia’s smile disappeared as quickly as it had come, replaced instead with an expression of complete seriousness. “This is my only chance, here where my family has no eyes,” she said. “I’m... aware that you have too few attendants right now. I will accept any order, even if you tell me to devote my entire life to you and never take a husband. Or, really, that’s what I would want. Please accept my name. I beg of you.”

I could feel the crushing anxiety in her voice. This really was her last chance.

“I was already resolved to accept your name before,” I said. “If you still wish for me to take it, then I will.”

“I thank you ever so much,” Gretia said, a gentle smile arising on her face.

It was at that moment that I truly understood my duty to Gretia; I needed to protect her smile—to ensure that she wouldn’t have to return to staring somberly down at her feet. I gave her back the sound-blocking magic tool and then informed my gathered retainers that I would be taking her name.

“Let us all gather ingredients for Muriella and Gretia next Earthday,” I said.

“Understood,” everyone replied.

Matthias met my announcement with a look of contentment. “In that case, once we return to the common room, I will explain to everyone how to gather the high-quality ingredients needed for a name-giving feystone. I know of a particularly efficient method.”

And so, we returned to the common room. Wilfried and Charlotte looked concerned when they saw me, but I gave them a smile and merely said, “According to Matthias, there is a more efficient method of obtaining high-quality ingredients.”

“Naturally, it is not every day that one gets to hunt a feybeast with parts as mana- and element-rich as a ternisbefallen,” Matthias noted. “Plus, feybeasts on that level are generally too strong for scholars and attendants to gather materials from. Doing so may take longer, but I am of the opinion that we should use more reliable and consistent methods here.”

I nodded; if there were feybeasts like ternisbefallens hanging out all over the place, then “terrifying” wouldn’t even begin to describe it. Matthias was going to be explaining what were essentially pro tips for gathering ingredients, so even children not intending to give their

names came to listen.

“So, what do you do?” Wilfried asked.

“Go to the gathering spot, dye a teigenehm fruit with your mana, and then feed that dyed fruit to a feybeast. The mana inside will cause the feybeast to swell to an enormous size—at which point you slay it and obtain its stone. I discovered this method when watching Lady Rozemyne enlarge Dunkelfelger’s treasure during that first-year ditter game.”

Evidently, these teigenehm fruit found in the Ehrenfest gathering spot produced similar effects to ruelles.

“However,” Matthias continued, “there is one problem: teigenehm fruit can only take one kind of mana at a time. You will need to dye as many as you have elements.”

It was necessary to separate one’s mana into its elements before dyeing the fruit, so this method could only be used by those who had such fine control—in other words, those in their third year and above. Luckily, this posed no issues at all, since only the older students had ended up needing to give their names.

“Have the apprentice knights weaken a feybeast, then feed it a mana-filled teigenehm fruit,” Matthias summarized. “Finish the beast off immediately after it grows, before it can get used to all the mana.”

“I see... That’ll take a while, yeah. I wanted some high-quality feystones myself, but I think I’ll leave it for later,” Wilfried said, opting out for the time being.

Leonore looked at both Wilfried and Charlotte, her brow furrowed. “Given that students will need to be guarded while dyeing the fruit and the feybeasts will need to be weakened to the brink of death, this trip will require many knights. How many can you lend us, Lord Wilfried, Lady Charlotte?”

“Sister,” Charlotte said, turning to me, “how many of your guard knights are staying behind in the dormitory on the day?”

I didn’t know everyone’s plans for Earthday, so I gave Leonore a meaningful look, prompting her to answer in my stead.

“The plan is for all of us to come,” Leonore said with a smile.

“Lady Rozemyne is going to the gathering spot, and we must see to her protection.”

“This is my first time hearing that, Leonore...” I said.

“That would be because I am only now deciding it, after hearing Matthias’s explanation,” she replied casually. “I have many reasons for this. First, I do not want us to be separated—it is unwise to split the party. Second, dyeing a teigenehm fruit can be quite a lengthy process, and I would like for you to protect them in the gathering spot with Schutzaria’s shield during this time. No matter how many apprentice knights we bring with us, it carries too much risk to guard

four charges simultaneously while hunting feybeasts.”

She had a point—by having me shield the tree and its surroundings with Schutzaria’s shield, the apprentice knights could hunt without needing to worry about us, and the four dyeing teigenehm fruit could focus on just that. Dyeing ruelles had been a nightmare precisely because they needed to grow in the moonlight, which had meant that I couldn’t use Schutzaria’s shield, as it would have blocked the light.

We even ended up failing that first attempt.

“Furthermore,” Leonore continued, “if we are to collect ingredients for this many people at once, then the gathering spot may need to be replenished with a blessing—which will also be an opportunity for you to expend some of your mana. This, alongside your prolonged efforts to maintain Schutzaria’s shield, should aid you in decompressing more of your mana.”

Right... That last reason is pretty big.

I responded with a firm nod. We had started to receive considerably fewer feystones from Ehrenfest, so I needed to take all the chances to let out my mana that I could get.

“Well,” Charlotte interjected, “if Sister is going to be shielding us, perhaps I should go along as well.”

“Lady Charlotte?”

“A teigenehm fruit dyed with one’s mana is a valuable ingredient all on its own, no?”

“Good point,” Wilfried agreed. “In that case, I’ll go too. Even if we don’t end up feeding them to feybeasts for their feystones, the fruit alone is bound to be worth having.”

And so it was decided that everyone in the dormitory, excluding the first-years, would go on this trip together. My shield would provide us all with much greater safety than usual, and we could all gather as much as we wanted, since everything was going to be regenerated right after.

“The first-years will stay here, as they naturally cannot travel to the gathering spot without a highbeast,” I said. “Please look forward to joining us next year.”

The first-years looked on with envy, having not started their brewing classes or learned to form highbeasts. Among them, however, a lone voice spoke up.

“Lady Rozemyne, I already know how to make my highbeast. Plus, I’m your guard knight, so please take me with you!”

It was Theodore, looking like the absolute last thing he wanted was to be left behind. He really was just like Judithe.

“Now, now, Theodore,” Judithe said, putting on her big-sister face, “you’re barely used to using your highbeast, so won’t you just

slow everyone down? I think you should sit this one out.”

A smirk crept onto my face. Had their positions been reversed so that Judithe was the one being left out, she absolutely would have gotten all teary-eyed and pleaded for us to bring her too. And, with that in mind, I granted Theodore permission to come.

“We do need as many apprentice knights as we can get,” I said. “You may come, Theodore.”

“Thank you,” he replied, his expression shifting from a look of relief to a subtle proud smile.

Now that we had decided which apprentice knights were going to be coming with us, Leonore, Alexis, and Natalie began to discuss the finer details. They went over how best to use Schutzaria’s shield, how to go about gathering ingredients, which feybeasts would need to be exterminated, and which ones would need to be weakened to turn into feystones, among other things.

For the most part, this had become a meeting of apprentice knights. Philine listened for a short while, then suddenly clapped her hands together and said, “Let us prepare lunch boxes, Lady Rozemyne. The gathering spot is warm and free of snow, and, with your shield of Wind, we will be free to eat at our leisure and without fear of any feybeast attacks.” There was an excited grin spread across her face.

“Oh my! What a splendid idea!” Charlotte cried with delight.

“I believe I shall have quiche.”

“We will also need to prepare warm tea, Lady Charlotte.”

Charlotte’s and my retainers’ suggestion that we should prepare lunch quickly snowballed into our Earthday gathering trip becoming a picnic, and with that in mind—

“Meat pies would be delightful as well.”

“Oh, but would sandwiches not be easier to eat?” Charlotte replied.

“Ngh... I’m going to prepare something too!” Wilfried interjected, forcing his way into the conversation after seeing how much Charlotte and I were enjoying ourselves. Our picnic had now gone a step further into a full-blown dormitory field trip.

The first-years had gone from looking disappointed to outright vexed. I would need to ask Hugo and Ella to cook them something special to make up for this.

“What will you have your chefs make, Sister?” Charlotte asked.

You can’t have a bento without onigiri, right?

“Why, there are so many tasty choices that I simply cannot decide.”

And so came Earthday. Several apprentice knights had gone to the gathering spot early to reduce the feybeast population, and, when we

received word that they were done, we went along after them. All of our lunches were packed securely in my extra-large Pandabus, and our group soon became caught up in excited chatter.

Once we arrived, I produced my shield around the teigenehm tree, and the gathering began. The apprentice knights got to work weakening the feybeasts outside of the barrier, while Theodore stood by my side as a guard knight.

“Hold this teigenehm fruit, focus, and pour mana of only one element into it,” Matthias instructed. “Continue this until the entire fruit has turned the color of that element.”

We all gripped our teigenehm fruit and started doing as Matthias had said. Just like with the ruelle, the teigenehm fruit were very resistant to the flow of mana, but I continued to force my mana into them until three were completely dyed. Naturally, I didn’t want to go so far as to make one of each element right away.

“Lady Rozemyne, my mana isn’t going in at all...” Muriella said, looking at my three dyed fruit with troubled eyes. I followed her gaze and then gave a nostalgic smile; it hadn’t been all that long ago that I had been in that same position.

“Feyplants are living beings too,” I said, “so they are very resistant to mana. You will not have much choice but to take your time and use rejuvenation potions.”

I was feeling somewhat tired from having dyed three fruit at once, so I decided to rest in Lessy. I may have gotten a little healthier since my second jureve, but there was still a very genuine risk that I might overdo it and collapse again. Still, thanks to decompressing my mana, I was feeling noticeably better than before.

Oh yeah... I think I heard once that too much mana is bad for the body.

I picked up a book and started to read, hoping that I would be able to reach the end of my time in the Royal Academy while remaining healthy. The sun was shining bright, and, as I reclined back into one of my Pandabus’s soft chairs, I thought about what an elegant way this was to spend one’s day off.

While I was reading and maintaining the shield, all those who wanted to give their names secured the feystones they needed. From there, we enjoyed a tasty lunch and some nice conversation.

Overall, it was a very fun Earthday.

Professor Fraularm's Class

I wouldn't make any progress in the scholar course until the professors set dates for my exams, so I sent them each an *ordonnanz* at once. Their replies came in steadily as the end of the week drew nearer; soon enough, I was waiting only on Fraularm. She had shown Ehrenfest nothing but hostility thus far, so I expected that she would use her authority as a professor to exploit my situation. Perhaps she would say that she couldn't find the time for my exam or claim to have never received my correspondence.

"I wonder what Professor Fraularm will do this year..." I said to my attendants, who were helping me to manage my schedule.

Philine rested a troubled hand on her cheek. "She should know by now that not even changing the curriculum can hinder you, and your status as the Saint of Ehrenfest will only make it harder for her to act against you. You have demonstrated your great talents so many times now that, if she did attempt to belittle you, she would only be met with disbelieving stares. She must be struggling to think of mean things to do at this point."

Brunhilde listened to Philine's somewhat twisted perspective with a wry smile, then added, "Even if Professor Fraularm has no intention of allowing a personal exam—as you suspect, Lady Rozemyne—is that not inconsequential in the grand scheme of things? You need only pass the final exam, after all. It would be wise for you to leave her exam for last and instead get a head start on your socializing and research."

"If passing were my only aim, then yes, that approach would work," I said.

However, relying on the final exam would potentially damage both my reputation and my chances of coming first-in-class—if more than one person secured the highest grade, then glory went to whoever passed first—and the last thing I wanted to do was break my promise to Ferdinand. Just to be safe, I had already sent a very deliberately worded *ordonnanz* to Hirschur: "I cannot come to your laboratory until after my exams are over, nor can I begin our joint research with the greater duchies. Is there anything I can do?" My hope was that the professor network would resolve things for me.

After breakfast but before our morning classes, I made my way to the common room, whereupon I convened with my siblings and their retainers. We needed to discuss our upcoming research project with

Drewanchel.

“We should decide on the fundamentals first so that nobody finds themselves lost for words on the receiving end of a question from Professor Gundolf,” I said.

Wilfried shook his head. “Rozemyne, I understand that we should inform our apprentice scholars about this research, but shouldn’t you speak to Father first?”

“I’ve already mentioned in one of my daily reports that we are starting a project with Drewanchel centered around your and Charlotte’s retainers. That said... student research doesn’t require the aub’s permission, does it? This doesn’t seem like something worth disturbing him over.” I was pretty sure that nobody else in the Royal Academy was giving detailed reports on their student research or requesting their archduke’s approval for it.

Wilfried and Charlotte exchanged looks. “It wouldn’t require his permission in most cases, but with you overseeing things, this is sure to be anything but normal.”

“Plus, this research into paper is deeply involved with Ehrenfest’s principal industries,” Charlotte added. “You should discuss it with Mother and Father, Sister.”

They were both in agreement, so it seemed wise for me to listen to them. “I suppose we can wait until Ehrenfest’s response to my report, then,” I conceded. “That said, I can’t imagine that our research will have much of a bearing on our own industries. We won’t be teaching Drewanchel to make paper; we will simply be looking into the uses of paper made from its feyplants.”

“You think so?”

“Indeed. My focus is on what can be done with strange paper and magic tools such as those made from Illgner’s feyplants. The actual process of creating the paper remains a valuable trump card for us, so we will save that for the Archduke Conference. It will not be published as Royal Academy research. Even rinsham is too much for Drewanchel to perfectly recreate—nobody ever thinks to include the scrub—so they will not stand a chance against plant paper, which is far more complicated and requires so many specialized tools. And, above all else, they surely will not expect that commoners are the ones making this paper that functions similarly to magic tools.”

“There can be no doubting that,” Ignaz and Marianne replied in agreement. “Magic tools can only be made by nobles.” They still couldn’t believe that feyplant paper was made through the same process as the normal variety. Magic tools with mana in them were apparently made via brewing.

“Just as we sold the rinsham production method during the Archduke Conference to balance our oil supply and demand, we will

want to sell our paper-making method such that our duchy's trees are not expended. However, when we do this, do you not think we should try to make as much money as we can?" I gazed intently at Wilfried and Charlotte, a glimmer in my eye. "This joint research is our means to exploit Drewanchel into raising the value of our paper. Find out the extent to which commoner-made paper can be used as magic tools, the most effective means of using it, and what needs to be done to raise its efficacy. How much we can earn may depend on the results you find."

"Rozemyne... you're wearing a pretty evil expression right now," Wilfried noted, seeming a bit put off.

Oops... Has my merchant spirit leaked through to the surface?

I quickly shut my mouth and smiled, doing my best to switch out of merchant mode. "In short, this is important for bringing wealth to Ehrenfest."

"But if you consider this research so crucial, Sister, then should you not be leading it personally?"

"That would make sense, but I feel that I should interact with Professor Gundolf as little as possible."

"Why? Has he been tormenting you?" Charlotte asked, her expression changing.

"Oh, no, not at all. It just seems safer to have Ignaz and Marianne take my place, as they know little about paper and will thus be immune to questioning." It was possible that they might learn the production method through reports and such, but without having attempted it themselves, there was no way that they would manage to explain it well enough for anyone else to understand.

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Were I to carry out our research with Professor Gundolf, then I would most likely reveal too many of our trade secrets without meaning to. This won't be a problem for Ignaz and Marianne; they can't leak what they don't know."

I was well aware of my tendency to run my mouth without meaning to. I also knew that I was terrible at resisting even the most obvious bait. Sure, I was able to keep a level head right now, but I would most certainly end up blabbing the moment I went up against ol' conniving Gundolf. The best solution was for me to avoid getting near him in the first place.

"He who fears drowning shall walk near no wells!" quoth the wise man! "The best defense is avoiding danger in the first place!" Wow, I sure have grown. Eheheh.

"What should we do when Professor Gundolf probes us about the paper-making process?" Marianne asked.

"We are researching the usage of magic tools; there is no need for

him to know how paper is made. You can inform him that his questions are best saved for the Archduke Conference, else he can look into the matter himself on his own time.”

“Understood.”

We went on to discuss how much information was safe to share for our joint research project, then I sent a request for paper made from Illgner’s feyplants to be sent over alongside a report on the research’s scope.

I was clearing one scholar course exam after another—and no matter where I went, the professors all asked me about the joint research I was doing with greater duchies. It seemed that the rumors had already spread quite far. I always kept my responses terse, saying that nothing was set in stone yet as our aubs had yet to discuss the idea, but the professors never seemed to believe me. Also, it turned out that their sources in both cases were dormitory supervisors. Rauffen and Gundolf were actively spreading word of our joint research venture to make sure that it went ahead, it seemed.

In the midst of all this, Fraularm sent me a response saying that she could schedule my exam for tomorrow morning. She had taken her sweet time, but I wasn’t going to complain; I had honestly expected her to ignore or outright refuse my request.

It looks like I’ve been too quick to judge you, Professor Fraularm.
Sorry.

Despite her malicious words and actions, it seemed that she was at least willing to do the bare minimum expected of her as a professor. I apologized to her in my heart, then sent her confirmation of my receipt.

An instant later, an ordonnanz arrived from Hirschur.

“I said to Fraularm that, with all these rumors about Ehrenfest doing collaborative research with greater duchies, I wondered what reason there could be for Ahrensbach being left out, especially since the bond between it and Ehrenfest should be stronger than ever with Ferdinand there. I wondered if perhaps it was due to a certain someone not keeping up proper communications,” the bird said. “Expect a response from her soon.”

As it turned out, Hirschur was the reason that Fraularm had replied to me. I reported that we had scheduled a date for my exam and then thanked her. It wasn’t long before another ordonnanz arrived.

“Mention joint research with Ahrensbach to secure a passing grade. Your research with Raimund should meet all the requirements if you make prototypes of his designs and publish your results.”

It took Raimund quite some time to realize his designs, owing to

his scarce supply of mana. If we collaborated, however, and the actual creation process was delegated to me, then I could research various aspects of the library's magic tools. As I pondered this, Hirschur gave me some more advice; she wanted me to find an excuse to summon her—perhaps the fact that our joint research was being done in her laboratory would work—so that she could oversee the grading process and ensure that it was all done fairly.

Holy cow... I never thought Professor Hirschur would be such a strong ally!

My brief conversation with Hirschur had given me hope that I might actually secure a passing grade in Fraularm's class. I was relieved, but at the same time...

"Do these rumors about our joint research projects really hold enough weight for Professor Fraularm to consider them a problem?" I asked my retainers. "Is it not just conversation between professors at this point?" I was already done with the archduke candidate course and was taking my exams for the scholar course separately from the other students, so I wasn't aware of the ongoing rumors.

"Well," Lieseleta said, "many students do know about our joint research, and, at this point, everyone believes the matter is settled. I was not aware that two professors were largely responsible for leaking this information, though."

Philine gave a vigorous nod of agreement, having collected some information herself now that she was going to the scholars' specialty building. "There is no mistaking that our results will receive universal praise once they are published. Several duchies have even petitioned Professor Hirschur about joining our collaborative project with Dunkelfelger."

Naturally, these duchies were only interested in securing connections to greater duchies and the royal family. Professor Hirschur had turned them all down as a result, saying that they would not serve as good research samples.

This is her first time properly helping us, so I never noticed it before, but... Professor Hirschur really is competent.

"Many duchies have also asked Professor Gundolf about joining our research with Drewanchel," Lieseleta continued. "He is flatly refusing those who aren't skilled enough to be of any help, though, so we don't need to worry about that."

Philine nodded again. "We should really be concerned about whether Lord Ignaz and Lady Marianne will meet his standards. He is sure to double down on working with you directly if not."

All in all, my retainers were making Gundolf seem like someone to be wary of.

Yeah, I really do need to avoid him...

While collecting information on the current state of the Royal Academy, I went to Fraularm's laboratory in the scholar building for my exam. I had expected there to be documents, materials, and magic tools strewn all over—a sight I was very much accustomed to—so what I actually saw took me by surprise. Seeing such a neat and tidy laboratory actually made me tear up a little.

Aah! It's so well organized in here! This is just what I'd expect from a professor who specializes in gathering and controlling information.

The room exuded self-discipline, and everything was in its place. It really was perfect for Fraularm.

"Allow me to cut to the chase, Lady Rozemyne," Fraularm began. "There are rumors that Ehrenfest will be doing research projects with Drewanchel and Dunkelfelger. Is this true?" Just as Hirschur had said, she was entirely focused on this one thing.

I gave a confident smile. "That is what we are hoping for, but our aubs have yet to discuss the matter, so I cannot say whether it will come to be. That said, with both dormitory supervisors so motivated, I imagine it will only be a matter of time. Now, may we begin the exam?"

"My!" Fraularm exclaimed, her eyebrows shooting up. "Should you not be thinking more about your relationship with Ahrensbach? Your teacher's engagement to Lady Detlinde was supposed to bring our duchies closer together. It is unfathomable that you are treating Ahrensbach with such disrespect."

"I am already being very considerate of the relationship between our two duchies, but I don't believe Ferdinand will accept Ordoschnelli without Glucklitat's blessing. It's very troubling." It was an indirect way of saying that our discussion wouldn't even be on the table unless I passed this class.

Fraularm flashed me a look of vexation, then took out the exam paper. In stark contrast to last year, the questions weren't at all unreasonable. I answered them all without trouble and then returned the paper.

"Now then—allow me to summon Professor Hirschur," I said.

Fraularm widened her eyes in confusion, so I gave an exaggerated look of surprise in response and placed a hand on my cheek.

"Oh? Have I misunderstood something?" I asked. "As this is my final scholar class, I thought we could pivot into discussing our joint research with Ahrensbach."

"N-Not at all. We will absolutely be discussing the joint research. But why summon Hirschur?" She blinked at me in surprise, having never imagined that I would agree so easily. She really was bad at dealing with the unexpected.

“Professor Hirschur is my dormitory supervisor; she needs to be present for these discussions so that she can report them to Aub Ehrenfest. Do you not agree?” I smiled and prepared an ordonnanz, not mentioning that Hirschur hadn’t been present for the other joint research discussions. “Professor Hirschur, I wish to discuss doing a joint research project with Ahrensbach. Do you have a moment?”

Hirschur replied with only one word: “Certainly.” She then arrived so suddenly that I could guess she had been standing in wait.

After looking between Fraularm and me, Hirschur sighed. “Good day, Fraularm. Lady Rozemyne, I meant to ask—should this research discussion not wait until you have finished your classes? I recall you saying that you could not visit my laboratory due to being busy with your studies.”

“Professor Fraularm’s class is my last one. Oh, but my test has yet to be graded. Might I ask if we can do that now?”

Now that Hirschur was here, Fraularm wouldn’t be able to fake my score. She grimaced as she took the exam paper over to her desk. Hirschur was watching closely to ensure there was no foul play—and barely a moment passed before she interjected.

“Fraularm, you...”

“Oh, dear me. I appear to have given Lady Rozemyne the wrong test. Ohohoho...”

“Not that it seems to be a problem. She answered all of the questions correctly.”

“She—?! What did you say?!” Fraularm examined the sheet at once; her eyebrows raised even higher than before.

“Did something happen?” I asked.



“The test you just took was for fifth-years,” Hirschur explained. “How do you even know this material, Lady Rozemyne?”

“Ferdinand forced me to learn the syllabus for every single grade, so it is all the same to me.”

I had been taught everything up until graduation in one go, so I wasn’t even sure what counted as third-year material. The questions that Fraularm had given to me had seemed fine enough, so I hadn’t thought twice when answering them.

“Ferdinand truly does demand the unreasonable,” Hirschur said, a hand on her forehead. “I am amazed that you can keep up with him.”

Meanwhile, Fraularm was muttering, “This isn’t normal...” over and over again. I personally believed that her giving me a test meant for older students was the abnormality here—as was Ferdinand going so over the top as to have prepared me for it. *I* was normal.

“Does this still count as a pass?” I asked. “Or do I need to redo the test with a third-year paper?”

Hirschur turned to Fraularm. “Is there time for a retake? I was under the impression that we were going to speak about a new joint research project.”

Unable to endure the pressure that Hirschur and I were putting on her, Fraularm went bright red and hysterically screamed, “That will do for the exam!” She took a seat to indicate that she was ready for our discussion to begin, though I couldn’t help but notice how aggressively she dropped into her chair. It couldn’t have been good for her backside, but at least I understood that she was feeling very displeased.

After coming to an unspoken agreement that it was best not to address the elephant in the room, Hirschur and I dived straight into the matter of our research project.

“If our two duchies are to collaborate,” I said, “then I firmly believe we should use the research that Raimund is doing in Professor Hirschur’s laboratory. He is Ferdinand’s disciple and should now be serving as his retainer as well. Publishing our work on magic tools should suffice as joint research.”

“My goodness!” Fraularm exclaimed. “That would make it Hirschur’s research, not a collaborative effort with Ahrensbach!”

“No, it would not,” I replied with a smile. “The work that Raimund is doing is his own, and Ahrensbach will publish it at the Interduchy Tournament. Professor Hirschur’s laboratory is simply the ideal place for us to carry out our research, as Professor Hirschur is Raimund’s and Ferdinand’s teacher, and I am Ferdinand’s disciple. That said, there is a very considerable chance that both Professor Hirschur and Raimund will become too absorbed in their work to

adequately report back to Ahrensbach. You are familiar with Professor Hirschur's tendencies, I expect?"

"Yes, I am. I cannot imagine her giving any proper reports once she is consumed," Fraularm replied, shaking her head and grimacing. It was clear at a glance that she had experienced this firsthand.

Hirschur merely smiled in response. She was playing along.

"Thus, I would pray for Ordoschnelli the Goddess of Couriers to involve Ferdinand in this joint research," I concluded.

It would be easier for me to contact Ferdinand under the guise of consulting my teacher about our joint research project. Not to mention, we could secure another route of communication by having Fraularm send messages to Ahrensbach herself—which she was sure to agree to, as doing so would bolster her reputation. Checks and censorship were to be expected, so we would only be able to write things that we didn't mind those in Ahrensbach seeing... but having an option other than Raimund would surely work in our favor.

"Professor Fraularm—as the dormitory supervisor of Ahrensbach, could you become our Ordoschnelli and ensure the success of our research?" I asked.

Fraularm's lips curved into a grin; she evidently liked the thought of adopting a position that would allow her to see all of our reports *and* play a key role in improving the relationship between our two duchies. "Very well. I shall give reports, as is my duty as a dormitory supervisor. However, Lady Rozemyne, I must warn you: limit your abnormal words and deeds, else cracks may form between our duchies, and Lord Ferdinand may begin to struggle more in Ahrensbach."

Hirschur stood up. "It seems the matter is settled, then." She indicated that we should go, but Fraularm called out to me before we could reach the door.

"Lady Rozemyne, how has your health been of late? Have there been any changes, perhaps?"

I gave Fraularm a questioning look, unsure what had spurred such a question.

"I'm just aware that you have a terribly weak constitution," she explained, faking a look of concern. "I'm a tad worried that you might not have the strength for all this research."

"There have been changes, yes. But, um... for the worse."

I wasn't sure what she was trying to find out, so I gave a vague answer with a half-smile. I certainly hadn't lied to her—things *were* taking a turn for the worse when you considered my unexpected blessing bomb during music class and my transformation into a human glow stick during whirling class, among other things.

"I see," Fraularm replied, a thin smile playing on her lips and a

dull glimmer appearing in her eyes. It was a worrying reaction, to say the least.

Hirschur's Personal Librarian

With my final exam for the scholar course now complete, I speedily made arrangements for a tea party with Dunkelfelger. There were many things complicating when it could be held, though, including how much progress Lestilaut, Hannelore, and Clarissa had made with their classes, and whether their aub had responded to our request to collaborate with our research. I told Brunhilde to inform them that there was no need for them to rush with their reply.

"It seems that Aub Dunkelfelger has not yet given his response," Brunhilde informed me after dinner that day. "They are going to wait until then before informing us of their free days."

In other words, our tea party wasn't going to happen right away. I turned to Lieseleta. "I am going to be visiting Professor Hirschur's laboratory from tomorrow onward. Could you begin preparing?"

"You may leave everything to me," she replied. "I will be extra sure to prepare enough cleaning supplies; Professor Hirschur's laboratory must be appropriately tidy if you are to enter, Lady Rozemyne."

Lieseleta immediately started selecting the cleaning tools she would use, her eyes alight with a fire that seemed to say, "At last—a worthy opponent!" Leonore took this opportunity to leave and consult the other guard knights about their availability. My retainers truly were reliable.

"I will leave tomorrow's preparations to you all," I said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I must go to my hidden room to write some letters."

This was a good time for me to pen a letter for Raimund to give to Ferdinand, and there was too much I needed to write in disappearing ink for me to stay here. And so I went into my hidden room.

After writing several pages with the ink that Ferdinand had given me, I paused to review my finished letter. It was a linear timeline of everything that I had done, with questions inserted when relevant... but something about it felt a little hard to comprehend.

"During the ritual for obtaining divine protections, I climbed the stairway to the great heights where the supreme gods live. Professor Hirschur wishes to know what I found there. I've recorded the magic circle that I could see from the top of the shrine, but should I show Sylvester? Also, I received so many divine protections that my shtappe can no longer keep up. Every little thing I do results in a

blessing. I've been trying to decompress and expend my mana as much as I can to remedy this, but is there anything else I can do?" I paused. "Hm... I-Is that clear enough? Surely Ferdinand, of all people, will understand what I mean!"

After convincing myself that everything was going to be fine, I put all of the pages on my desk so that the ink could dry. In the meantime, I also considered adding a secret message to the letter that would pass through Fraularm. As an experiment to see how much longer Fraularm's would take to reach Ferdinand—that is, assuming it arrived at all—I wrote, "This letter is coming to you via Professor Fraularm. Did it arrive?" Once the disappearing ink dried and the message disappeared, I would need to write something innocuous over it.

But what would I be okay with Professor Fraularm reading...? This is tough.

"Now then—I am off to the laboratory."

It was the first of many days I would be spending in Hirschur's lab, and I was speaking to Charlotte in the common room. She was still in the process of completing her practical lessons, but she didn't have class today, so she was going to discuss the feyplant paper research with Marianne.

"It hardly looks like you are on your way to a laboratory, Sister..." Charlotte blinked in surprise at Lieseleta, who had with her a cart stacked with various things. There seemed to be about as much as when we would attend tea parties in the library—which was far too much for a simple trip to Hirschur's laboratory.

I gave a troubled smile. "We have decided to take cleaning tools and some food."

Hirschur and Raimund didn't live healthy lives by any means. I explained the disastrous state of the laboratory to Charlotte, at which point Rihyarda sighed and insinuated that I was one to talk. Apparently, I neglected my health just as much whenever I was absorbed in a book.

I responded with an evasive smile and then exited the dormitory. Classes had already started, so the hallway was quiet and devoid of people. Accompanying me today were Rihyarda and Lieseleta as my attendants, Matthias and Theodore as my guard knights, and Roderick as my scholar.

"This is going to be my first time entering the scholar building..." Matthias said as we approached it. Theodore gave a nod of agreement, implying that this was the case for him as well.

Once we were inside, Matthias muttered that the scholar building had so many more individual rooms than the knights' one. There were

countless storage rooms as well as laboratories here, so I could see exactly what he meant. In contrast, the knight building was a collection of generally large training facilities, with most of the smaller rooms belonging to the professors. It was the tallest and widest of the specialty buildings and was located farther away than the rest.

“Ngh. What’s that weird smell...?” Theodore asked, looking around. I could tell that he wanted to pinch his nose, but, as a guard knight, he had settled for just wrinkling it instead.

“You have yet to attend any brewing classes, so it makes sense that you aren’t accustomed to it,” I said with a giggle. “You are smelling herbs and various other ingredients. They can be a bit much when they’re all mixed together, but you will grow used to it eventually.”

Theodore gave us all doubting looks. “This really doesn’t bother you?”

“You will adapt whether you want to or not once you learn to make potions yourself and start drinking them during training. You will even learn to drink worse-smelling concoctions when necessary. Besides, what you are complaining about now might as well be a flowery perfume compared to the potions Ferdinand creates.”

Theodore twitched, regarding us with an expression that practically screamed, “What the heck do you guys drink?!” He didn’t know the half of it, though. Ferdinand’s potions tasted so vile that, after trying one, Charlotte had assumed that we were pulling some kind of twisted joke on her—and that had been the “kind” version. The original was the stuff of evil.

“Please wait here for a moment, Lady Rozemyne,” Lieseleta said upon our arrival at Hirschur’s laboratory. “I must first ensure that everything is in suitable condition for your entry.” She then went inside ahead of the rest of us, bringing along her cart laden with magic tools and cleaning utensils.

During my first visit to Hirschur’s laboratory, Lieseleta had placed a vacuum-like tool on the floor that had sent Hirschur and Raimund into a panic. “I just hope Professor Hirschur doesn’t lose anything she holds dear...” I muttered to myself.

“We sent her an ordonnanz yesterday informing her of our expectations,” Rihyarda said calmly. “I am sure she has put away all that she deems important.”

“LIESELETA! NOOOOOO!”

Evidently not...

Judging by her scream, Hirschur had prioritized research over cleaning her lab, even when given a clear warning. Rihyarda sighed

and shook her head.

“My apologies for the wait, Lady Rozemyne.” Lieseletha opened the door for me with a smile, meaning we could finally enter the laboratory. There were sizable mountains of documents stacked on the brewing desks—no doubt those that Hirschur had saved from the floor during Lieseletha’s ruthless tidy-up.

“Professor Hirschur, is Raimund not here?” I asked.

“He is in class at the moment. We will wait for him to return before discussing the joint research,” Hirschur explained. Raimund was passing his classes steadily and securing more free time as a result, so he was popping in every now and again. “Use the time until then to look over these documents. Our discussion with Raimund will go much smoother once you understand what is written here.”

Hirschur had given me blueprints and memos about what we were planning to make. My eyes wandered from the mountain of documents precariously teetering on the desk to the tidy bookcase against the wall.

“Professor Hirschur, I wish to organize your documents before going through them. Would you permit me? I want everything to be as neat as that bookcase over there.”

“That bookcase only contains documents that I am no longer using for research—and it was Ferdinand who organized them like that. You two truly are alike, asking to sort through my things the moment you arrive. You may organize the documents on these desks as you like.”

“Ferdinand organized them? Does that mean they’ve been untouched for ten years?!”

“He came by last year, no? To get his magic tools.”

As well as his magic tools, Ferdinand had taken many blueprints and research documents that he had determined he would need while having Justus and Eckhart organize the rest.

Wowee. Ferdinand must have it rough, having to look after his own teacher.

Following in his footsteps, I took several documents from the bookcase; I wanted to see how everything had been labeled and organized. The boards were sorted into subjects, and each subject was arranged in chronological order. Among the documents were various sheets of parchment that I immediately recognized as belonging to Ferdinand—the handwriting was a clear giveaway.

Hm? This is about the Royal Academy’s twenty mysteries.

There was a list of mysteries that Justus had gathered, as well as a simple map.

And this must be a map of the Academy. Wow. It’s basically a circle. I didn’t know much about the layout of the Royal Academy—it

was always too cold for me to leisurely tour the grounds in my Pandabus—but Rihyarda and Bonifatius had told me that, back in the day of treasure-stealing ditter, it had pretty much been common knowledge.

These spots here must be where the mysteries were.

The map was covered with way more than twenty circles and crosses, most likely indicating things and places they had checked. It was aged, having likely been handwritten over a decade ago, and looked entirely like a treasure map. However, this research into the Royal Academy's mysteries ended so abruptly that it was actually suspicious.

"Professor, this is Ferdinand's research, right?" I asked. "I can't see any results or conclusions..."

"Indeed. He never finishes research that he doesn't intend to publicize."

"Really?"

"Really. He stops once he understands and agrees with the results himself, so he never ends up writing down his findings. There have even been occasions when he has determined it best not to leave any written records at all, so as to avoid leaving any traces of his discoveries."

Those who were receiving funding from their duchy were required to report their findings, but those covering their own costs often chose not to leave any documents behind.

Darn. This research seems pretty interesting as well. I wish I could have seen it all.

I pursed my lips, checked the binding of the document and where it was placed, then closed it.

"Now that I understand how Ferdinand organized these documents, I am going to begin sorting through the rest," I announced. It would probably be best for me to stick with the same organization method so that Hirschur and Raimund could intuitively follow it—and with that in mind, I undid one of the bindings around my hip and pulled it taut.

"Milady, what are you doing?"

"(Tasuki-gake). First, I must get these troublesome sleeves out of the way."

"Tasu... Say again?"

Rihyarda looked on curiously as I executed the ancient Japanese art of using a sash to tuck up my billowy sleeves so that they wouldn't get in the way of my work. But no sooner was my improvised tasuki in place than Rihyarda shook her head and undid it.

"It is unsightly to reveal your arms like that, milady. You will not

be doing any of the actual sorting either. Just take a seat; Lieseleta and I will follow your instructions.”

A seat was prepared for me, from which I was made to direct my retainers as they organized the documents on my behalf. My first course of action was to divide the workload between them. Rihyarda and Lieseleta were going to be working together to sort the documents into boxes, bind them, and then put them in the bookcase.

“Are these documents what you’re working on now, Professor Hirschur?”

“Ah! Yes, I’ve been searching for those for quite some time.”

“Would you mind me storing Raimund’s documents in this bookcase too? Or do you expect him to take them back to his dormitory?”

“He can choose to take them with him when he graduates. There are many documents that will become unneeded over time.”

As I went through one document after another, the bookcase started to become more and more organized. The once messy brewing desks were cleared in no time.

“Lady Rozemyne, there are still some documents here,” Hirschur said. “Go through these as well while you’re at it.”

“You may count on me.” I took the documents and put them where they needed to be.

You know, I’m starting to feel like Hirschur’s personal librarian...

My work in the Library Committee only ever amounted to supplying mana, so this was my first time doing actual librarian work since coming to the Royal Academy. I was so content that I couldn’t help but hum to myself.

So, what next...? I’m having so much fun right now!

I was continuing to organize the documents, loving every moment, when fourth bell rang. Time really had flown by. Raimund stumbled in not long after, his legs trembling slightly.

“Bad news, Professor Hirschur... Oh!” He saw me, then his eyes shot open. “Excuse me! I must have entered the wrong room!”

And with that, Raimund was gone again.

“This can’t have been the wrong room, right?” I asked, exchanging a look with Lieseleta.

Hirschur cackled. “My laboratory looks so tidy now that he must not have recognized it. He will return soon enough, so let us prepare a meal. You’ve brought food, have you not?” Her lips curled into a grin as she pointed at Lieseleta’s cart.

In truth, I was getting hungry myself. Rihyarda and Lieseleta gave the now-spacious brewing desks a thorough clean before preparing a meal for us all.

Raimund returned just as we were ready to start eating. He

knocked on the door, then peered shyly into the laboratory. His hair was in a complete state, and he seemed to have put as little thought into his clothes as usual. The only noise we heard from him was the slight grumble of his stomach; he really must have been hungry.

“Raimund, make yourself a little more presentable before you come inside, even if only with waschen,” Lieseleta said, shooing him back outside with a smile. “I would not like for you to stand in Lady Rozemyne’s presence as you are now.”

Raimund closed the door, used waschen, then entered again. “My sincerest apologies,” he said.

Now that everyone was here, we could finally begin our lunch. Hirschur brought up our joint research project as she ate, while Raimund sat with his shoulders slumped, having to wait for her to serve him from her plate.

Last night, Raimund explained, he had received a summons from Detlinde. “You are representing Ahrensbach,” she had said. “Make sure to contact Lord Ferdinand on a regular basis, and ensure your research is done carefully so that you do not embarrass Ahrensbach alongside yourself.”

“So it wasn’t a mistake after all...” Raimund sighed. “It came as a shock at first, since she had never spoken to me before, but then I assumed that she must have taken an interest in my work through Lord Ferdinand.”

Raimund, under the assumption that Detlinde was referring to his Interduchy Tournament research, had said that he would treat the matter with the utmost care. It had only been this morning, when he was on his way to class, that he had discovered the truth. Fraularm, his dormitory supervisor, had told him to report to her once the details of our joint research project were decided.

“And so I came here, thinking that I should report this to Professor Hirschur,” he concluded.

“News about Ehrenfest’s joint research projects with Drewanchel and Dunkelfelger has become very popular,” Hirschur explained while halving the food on her plate and giving some to Raimund. “Fraularm must want more achievements to her name in the Sovereignty, which is why she has asked us to collaborate with Ahrensbach as well, using Ferdinand as our mutual connection.”

Um, excuse me? Wasn’t it because you lit a fire under her?

I kept that thought to myself, though, since Hirschur had played such a crucial role in helping me pass my final scholar exam. Besides, Raimund would probably find this situation easier to accept if we told him that it was his own dormitory supervisor’s idea and not ours.

“Raimund, both you and Lady Rozemyne are Ferdinand’s disciples, so if you provide the blueprints and have Lady Rozemyne

make the prototypes, then keeping as you were should suffice for your joint research.”

“Have Lady Rozemyne... make the prototypes?” Raimund repeated, his eyes wide. “I could not ask an archduke candidate to do that for me.” But while he was trembling at the very idea, Hirschur was entirely unmoved.

“Lady Rozemyne has been trained by Ferdinand, so she is used to practical brewing and can use time-saving magic circles. She also has plentiful mana due to being an archduke candidate—enough that she can brew several times back-to-back. That said, while her mindset and brewing abilities are impressive, her magic circle designs are fairly standard. She will do fine in classes but does not have the skill necessary to become a scientist. Thus, I believe the two of you will produce suitable results when paired together.”

As it turned out, I wasn’t anywhere near as skilled at designing magic circles as Raimund and Ferdinand.

“Furthermore,” Hirschur continued, “if word spreads that your successful research was in part thanks to your mutual teacher, Ferdinand, then his reputation in Ahrensbach will surely improve.”

Well, that meant I needed to give this my all.

“Let us all work hard to secure Ferdinand a better position in Ahrensbach, to get Raimund accepted as the retainer of an archducal family member despite his being a mednoble, and to create the magic tools I want for my library,” I declared.

“Well, I can hardly refuse with everyone so motivated. Besides, turning down this opportunity would make Lady Detlinde and Professor Fraularm treat me as their enemy for life...” Raimund sounded a little annoyed about his last statement, but he agreed to do the research all the same.

“In that case, I will start making the prototypes after lunch. Please provide me with your blueprints and instructions.”

“Understood. Thank you for your gracious assistance.”

Once lunch was over, I gave Hirschur and Raimund a tour of their newly organized bookcase. “Raimund, all of your work documents can be found from here to here,” I said, indicating two points on one of the shelves. “I’ve done as much as I can to put them in chronological order.”

“This is the first time I’ve seen the lab so organized...” Raimund replied, moved.

Pleased to have been praised for my librarian work, I saw Raimund off to his afternoon classes and then got straight to brewing. I produced one magic tool after another while referring to his documents, pausing only when Hirschur asked me to fill a tool with mana. I used physical enhancements to strengthen my body, and

rejuvenation potions to recover my stamina...

Yeah, okay. This lab is too much. I've ended up downing so many potions without even meaning to.

"So, what do you think?" I asked Raimund when he returned from his class, my chest puffed out. "Made exactly as ordered, right? I worked pretty hard."

I was buzzing with excitement as Raimund examined the prototypes... but rather than giving me the praise I was hoping for, he slumped over, looking entirely defeated.

"Um... Are they that bad...?"

"No, they're fine. It's just... my soul almost left my body when I saw just how much mana you have to work with..."

Raimund, in contrast, had so little mana that he needed rejuvenation potions even when brewing prototypes. Producing a single tool per day was far from a sure thing for him, so seeing four lined up before him served as a painful reminder that the world wasn't fair.

"I will send these to Lord Ferdinand so that he can grade them," Raimund said.

"Save that for tomorrow; I've written a letter that I want you to send to him as well. Oh, I also have a letter to be given to him through Professor Fraularm." This was my way of saying that I intended to take the duty of writing reports into my own hands, since nobody else in the lab was likely to.

Raimund gave me a relieved smile. "That will be tremendously helpful. Professor Fraularm has already told me to start giving her reports, so..."

The next day, I entrusted Raimund with my two letters—one for Ferdinand and the other for Fraularm—then prayed to Ordoschnelli the Goddess of Couriers.

May I receive a response from Ferdinand without issue.

A Request from Royalty

The next correspondence I received wasn't a response from Ferdinand but rather an invitation from Eglantine. "Lady Rozemyne, it seems the royal family is hosting a tea party for bookworms," Brunhilde said as she handed me the letter.

"But I've yet to tell Professor Eglantine that I completed my last scholar exam... Did you inform her?"

Brunhilde sighed. "It seems that your tendency to speed through your classes is a frequent topic of conversation among the professors."

"I see they share intelligence much more freely than I thought."

"You are drawing a lot of attention as the key figure behind no fewer than three major joint research projects," Brunhilde explained. The professors were all eager to know when our research would begin and who was involved—and in that regard, it was only natural that Eglantine had found out about me passing my final scholar class.

"Lady Eglantine's tea party for bookworms is sure to get all those related to the library together in one place. The sooner, the better, I suppose; she won't have much luck summoning both librarians at once when the library starts getting busier."

Given that Eglantine was specifically hosting bookworms, I guessed that she wanted to discuss Hannelore becoming Schwartz and Weiss's new master. Although it was a tea party on the surface, it was actually a summons from royalty.

"So, where is this tea party being held?" I asked.

"Professor Eglantine's villa—or so I am told. It is tradition to use the tea party room of whomever is the host, and the number of participants means that meeting in the library simply isn't an option." Brunhilde then gave me a wry smile and added, "Although librarians are generally required to stay in the library, you are about the only person who would think to hold a tea party in their office."

Brunhilde went on to tell me who was due to attend the tea party. There were the two librarians, we three members of the Library Committee, and our hosts, Eglantine and Anastasius. Considering that there were going to be three royals and all their retainers present, I could see why the library's office would be much too cramped.

I mean, it was full to bursting when we all met to discuss changing Schwartz and Weiss's master.

"So Prince Anastasius is going to be there, then..." I said. "I

thought he was too busy to come to the Royal Academy. Isn't that why Prince Hildebrand is here in his place?"

Refusing his royal duties but attending tea parties to be with Eglantine made him look entirely like Ewigeliebe—but maybe I just thought that because he had barged into the music professors' tea party that one time.

You're married now. You don't need to keep clinging to her like this, y'know.

That said, Hirschur had mentioned Anastasius giving her advice about our joint research project with Dunkelfelger, so it was probably best to be thankful to him. Understanding that didn't make me feel any better about having to deal with him, though.

"Lady Hannelore is going to be there, at least," I continued. "Well, not that I could refuse to attend a tea party hosted by the royal family anyway."

It was my own failure to communicate that had resulted in Hannelore becoming Schwartz and Weiss's master without meaning to; I couldn't abandon her when just explaining the circumstances to Eglantine had made her terribly anxious. At the same time, however, I was being summoned by the very people I had been told to avoid at all costs—there was no avoiding feeling depressed about it.

After seeing me so despondent, Brunhilde couldn't help but chuckle. "There is no need to feel so down, Lady Rozemyne. As this is a tea party for bookworms, Prince Anastasius is planning to bring books from the palace library."

Books from the palace library?! Be still, my beating heart!

I clasped my hands together and gazed up at Brunhilde with my brightest smile of the day. "As expected of Lady Eglantine's honorable husband. She could not have married a better man!"

"I am glad to see this sudden burst of optimism. Have you decided what books you will prepare in turn? We have promised to lend them some as well, remember."

"Mother's love stories would be the safest choice, I imagine. Lady Eglantine seemed interested in reading them."

This was still a summons from royalty, but the thought of trading books was really raising my spirits. I got straight to work selecting books. In the meantime, my attendants formed plans to prevent me from collapsing from excitement, while my guards discussed who among them would join me at the tea party. My scholars started writing a report on the invitation.

I spent my days visiting Hirschur's lab and deciding on the books and sweets we were going to bring to the bookworm tea party—and before I knew it, the day of our gathering arrived. Afternoon tea

parties were often held after fifth bell, but today's had been scheduled for fourth-and-a-half.

We passed through the halls, which were quiet now that everyone was in class, and made our way to Eglantine's villa—whereupon we met with Anastasius's head attendant, Oswin.

"Lady Rozemyne. Thank you for coming."

The fact that Oswin was greeting us here at Eglantine's villa really made it sink in that she and Anastasius were married now.

We were taken to a room with Anastasius, Eglantine, and their retainers, but the other participants were nowhere to be seen. They must not have arrived yet. We exchanged lengthy greetings, after which I turned my attention to the door. No matter how much I willed it, however, there was still no sign of anyone else arriving. I gazed around the room, feeling awkward as my attendants handled the exchange of sweets and reading material.

"Have I come too early, by chance?" I asked.

"No, we summoned you early so that we could discuss certain matters," Anastasius replied, gesturing for me to take a seat.

Having a special chat with the royal family really didn't sound good. I wanted to leave on the spot, but that naturally wouldn't fly. Instead, I took a deep breath, smiled, and said, "Very well; what might you want to discuss?"

Anastasius fixed me with a glare. "Your excessive actions as of late."

Excessive actions? But I've been in control of my mana ever since I stopped compressing it so much...

I racked my brain, trying to figure out what Anastasius was referring to. He was bound to be getting his information from Eglantine, so it must have been something that she was involved with.

"Ah!" I brought a fist down into my open palm. "Do you mean when my feystones started shining during whirling class?" That had been the very definition of excessive.

Anastasius's cheek twitched. "No. I mean your decision to start joint research projects with three greater duchies at once. I wish to hear Ehrenfest's reason for abruptly making such a major play."

"Hm? I would rather you not call that excessive. Ehrenfest had no way to decline."

Eglantine gave a peaceful smile. "May I ask why that is, Lady Rozemyne?"

"Certainly. Our collaboration with Dunkelfelger came at Prince Anastasius's suggestion, and Drewanchel approached us about working with them. Ehrenfest's position in the duchy rankings meant we were unable to turn them down, and the research was mutually beneficial, so accepting was our only option."

“And as for Ahrensbach?” Anastasius asked.

I hesitated for a moment. “It was the only way I could pass the scholar course.”

“Elaborate.”

“I assume you know that Professor Fraularm views me as an enemy for one reason or another. I needed to take a one-on-one exam with her, but she was determined not to let that happen.”

“Oh my...” Eglantine muttered, her eyes wide.

“I received no report about that,” Anastasius added, his eyes narrowed in contrast to his wife’s.

“It is a done deal either way,” I said. “I will consult you next year if we see history repeating itself. Anyway, the research is something that I was already doing with an Ahrensbach apprentice scholar in Professor Hirschur’s laboratory, so publishing it as joint research is little more than a formality. It will require no extra effort from us. Not to mention... there was my promise to you, Prince Anastasius.”

Eglantine blinked. “And what manner of promise was that?”

Anastasius searched the air with his eyes, trying to remember.

“I promised to publish research that would surprise you during the next Interduchy Tournament, remember?” I said, trying to jog his memory. “I did not expect all these developments to occur, though. Even I am surprised where we find ourselves today, so you must be surprised as well, Prince Anastasius.”

Anastasius made a face like he had just chugged one of Ferdinand’s ultra-nasty potions, then rested a hand on his forehead. “Indeed... I am so surprised that just thinking about all this is making my head ache.”

“I thank you ever so much,” I said, smiling to myself. “I am glad that I did not end up breaking a promise made to royalty.”

Eglantine giggled. “To think you had made such a promise with Lady Rozemyne, Anastasius... You two truly are close.”

“We are *not* close,” Anastasius scoffed, making no effort to hide the glare he was directing at me. “I simply said that Ehrenfest needed someone other than Hirschur to start publishing worthwhile research.”

I might have understood a pout, but Anastasius’s harsh eyes seemed entirely unnecessary. Eglantine had only called us friends, after all.

“So that was how Ehrenfest ended up doing research projects with three greater duchies at once. Do you have any plans to collaborate with Klassenberg too?” Anastasius asked.

It sounded like a good idea if we wanted to keep things balanced, but there were a few problems. I turned to Eglantine, since she was as good a Klassenberg representative as any. “We have not received any passionate appeals from Klassenberg as we have from Drewanchel,

there is no research that we are required to do with them as there is with Dunkelfelger, and there is no existing work that we can simply repurpose as there is with Ahrensbach. As a result, we do not have any intention of another collaboration at the moment. This may not be something I should admit to members of royalty, but we do not even have the apprentice scholars necessary to start a project with another greater duchy.”

We weren’t completely without apprentice scholars to spare, but we didn’t have many with the mana and practical grades necessary to do research with a greater duchy.

Anastasius gave a curt nod, appearing to have noticed my subtle pleas for Klassenberg not to ask about working with us too. “I can understand Ehrenfest’s perspective here. I should warn you, though—doing three joint research projects at once won’t be easy. Valuable research is often at risk of being stolen, so you would do well to assume that your work is being targeted at all times.”

I gave a solemn nod in response, but I was just playing along. I really doubted that anyone would want to steal any of my research. Anyone who came across our findings on the connection between offering prayers to the gods and obtaining divine blessings had nothing to gain unless they prayed sincerely. Perhaps they would publicize the importance of the temple, but, hey, I wasn’t going to complain about the help.

There was also our research on how to best add value to Ehrenfest’s specialty exports, but that getting stolen wouldn’t do any harm to us either. Besides, if another duchy wanted our work so desperately that they were willing to make an enemy of Drewanchel, then more power to them. I would actively look forward to seeing whatever they discovered and published.

Last of all was our research into making the library’s magic tools more efficient, though this would definitely earn less attention from the Sovereignty than our other endeavors. Theoretically, if someone came along who was passionate enough about our work to undergo Ferdinand’s harsh trials and become his disciple as well, then I would welcome them with open arms.

In other words, anyone putting in effort to steal my research would only end up disappointed.

All of a sudden, I was dragged from my thoughts by the sound of someone clearing their throat. “Are you listening?” Anastasius asked, looking at me in complete disbelief.

I already knew from experience that telling the truth here would just make the other person mad, so I stayed silent and put on my best smile.

“I was speaking of your blessing. You were the one who blessed

our graduation, were you not?"

My heart leapt into my throat. "Wh-Whatever might you be talking about?" This change of subject had come completely out of the blue, and it didn't seem to be going in a good direction for me.

Anastasius gave an unnecessarily pretty smile. "Did you know that, as a result of that miraculous blessing that came out of nowhere upon our entry, people have started to say that Eglantine and I are suited to become the next sovereign couple?"

"Ngh..."

He was speaking with complete confidence, and as I desperately tried to find a way through this, Anastasius went on to explain just how many ripples my blessing had sent through the Sovereignty.

"My retainers, who had supposedly resigned themselves to serving a prince, were filled with renewed vigor and started saying that I am better suited to becoming the next king. Meanwhile, my brother's retainers were whipped into a fervor, asserting that Eglantine was meant to be the bride of the next king after all and that my brother should steal her back from me. Emotions were so high that we could no longer say we had given up our claim to the throne, for no one believed us. My brother, my father, and I worked our fingers to the bone trying to calm everyone down."

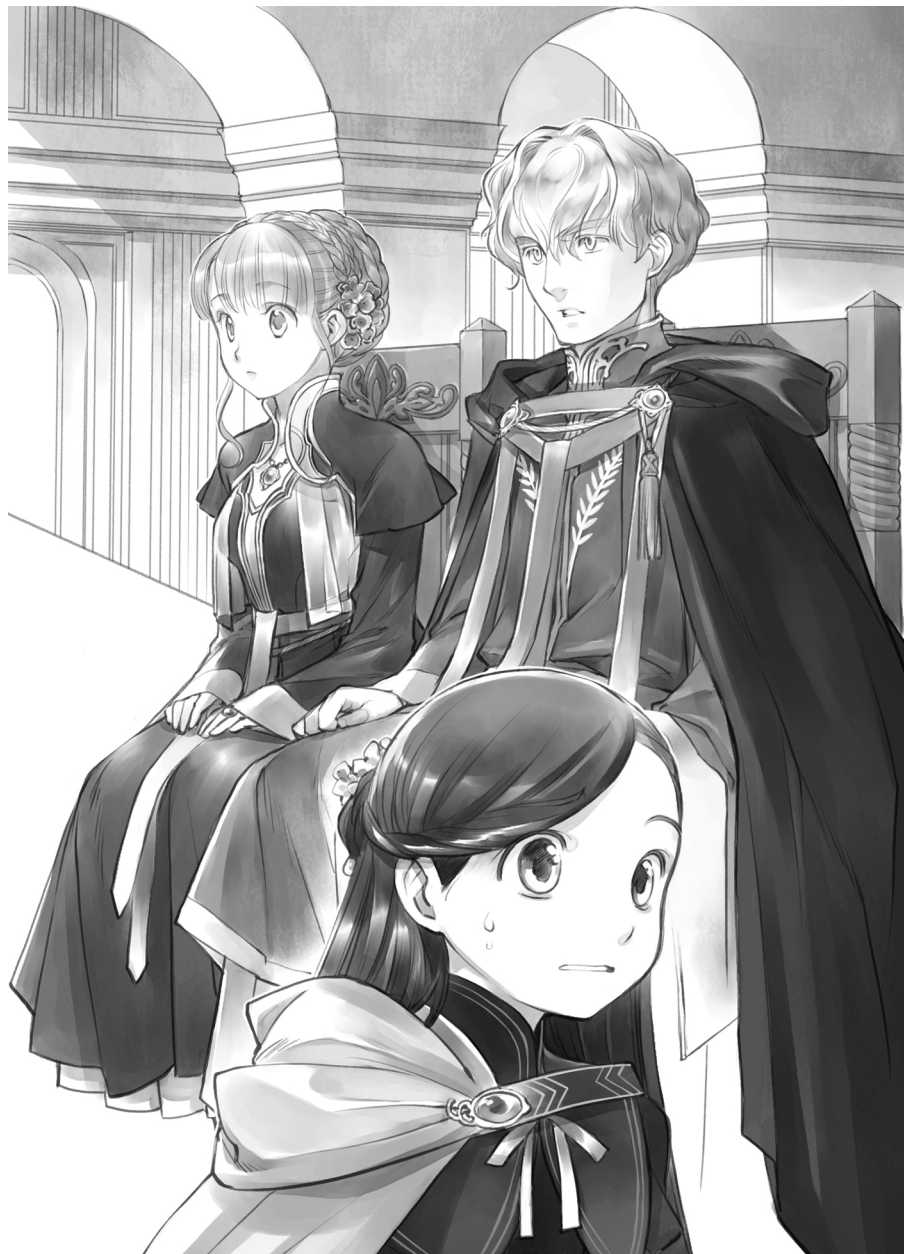
In short, I was personally responsible for causing serious chaos among the royal family. I shrank down, wanting nothing more than to run away—not that I would ever be able to.

After watching my silent struggle for a moment longer, Anastasius gave me a very serious look. "Thus, during the next Archduke Conference, I must ask you to serve as High Bishop for my brother's Starbind Ceremony."

"I concur," Eglantine said. "Please grant a true blessing to the next king and his wife."

"It comes so easily to you that you even kept leaking them while playing an entire song in class, did you not?"

I went quiet, unsure how to answer. I was meant to be avoiding the royal family at all costs, and the last thing I wanted to do was provoke the Sovereign High Bishop by taking his place. At the same time, however, I had also been warned not to defy royalty. Making the right call seemed challenging beyond words.



“Is that a royal order?” I asked.

“No, consider it a personal request. I want you to bless my brother so that nobody will protest him becoming king. He is going to be in a difficult position even after becoming the crown prince. Do you understand why?”

My answer came to mind immediately: *Because he doesn't have the Grutrissheit*. I wasn't sure whether I should say it, though. My throat went dry as Anastasius's gray eyes began to scrutinize me.

“There was an attack during last year's award ceremony,” Anastasius continued. “You heard what they said, I expect.”

“They shouted something about a false king with no Grutrissheit...” I replied.

Anastasius nodded slowly. “That is correct. It all started when the second prince was killed after inheriting the Grutrissheit, for that was the last anyone ever saw of it. We have searched everywhere—the second prince's villa, the place where he was killed, the royal palace, and even the estates of the important nobles who were close to him—but to no avail. Thus, my father is a king without the Grutrissheit.”

I nodded carefully to show that I was listening. In truth, I didn't have a clue why he was taking us on this unexpected tangent, but I could sense that this was something very profound. I could also sense that I was being drawn down into the deepest depths of this country's problems.

“Without the Grutrissheit, not even the king can use spells essential to running the country—and even when constantly offering our mana, the most we can do is maintain its current state. It must be understood that Yurgenschmidt will collapse in a literal sense if someone does not take the throne and supply its land with mana. My father has been providing his with the dedication of a saint since becoming king. As has my brother. As have I.”

I remembered being told that the current situation was like an aub needing to run his duchy without foundational magic. As someone who had taken archduke candidate lessons, I understood just how backbreaking that would be.

“Do you see now why, in such desperate times, that blessing drove people into such a frenzy?”

I pressed my lips together in lieu of a response.

“Just as we were fearing that another battle for Eglantine might begin, my brother declared that our wedding had already been settled. He was so kind as to chastise his retainers and give us his blessing, so the very least I can do is grant him some peace and silence some of the voices around him. To that end, I want the Saint of Ehrenfest, who received countless divine protections from the gods, to bless his

Starbind Ceremony.”

Anastasius’s feelings for his family tugged at my heartstrings. If my blessing had caused all of those problems, then I really did need to take responsibility. Plus, truth be told, I had a bit of an ulterior motive. Perhaps this would allow me to see Ferdinand and Detlinde’s Starbinding as well.

“I would ask that you seek permission from Aub Ehrenfest, the king, and the Sovereign High Bishop,” I said. “From there, if you can permit me to bring my guard knights and assure me that the Sovereign High Bishop will not be shamed in any way, then I will gladly accept this request made out of love for your brother.”

“Thank you,” Anastasius said, exhaling. Eglantine was wearing a truly happy smile beside him.

It was then that Oswin entered with news of a visitor. Hannelore had arrived.

“Although my actions were unintentional, I must express my sincerest apologies,” Hannelore said right after our initial greetings.

“There is no need,” Anastasius replied, stepping in before she could apologize further. “Eglantine told you already, did she not? The library is at fault for having failed to keep you informed. Rather, we have invited you to this tea party because we have something to ask of the Library Committee.”

“You wish for our help with something?” Hannelore asked, her eyes wide. She had come expecting to be scolded, only to receive a petition for aid instead. It was little wonder she was so taken aback.

I feel you. I really do. Requests from royalty are just plain bad for the heart.

So I thought, but my eyes were on the books that Hannelore’s apprentice scholar had brought. They were thick and heavy-looking—exactly what I had come to expect from Dunkelfelger.

I wonder what they’re about this time. I can’t wait.

“Rozemyne, I can tell from your expression that you think this does not apply to you, but you are going to be helping as well,” Anastasius said.

“Hm? But Professor Solange told me not to go to the library until Professor Hortensia has finished taking ownership of Schwartz and Weiss.”

Anastasius looked down at me, scoffed, and then gave a slight grin. “This is unrelated to that matter. In order to encourage the bookworms of the Library Committee to help us, we have brought books from the palace library. I look forward to your assistance.”

“You can count on me! I will do absolutely everything I can to help!”

As I had been explicitly told to never refuse an order from the royal family, I gleefully accepted Anastasius's request. Hannelore nodded as well, saying that she could hardly refuse a request from the royal family.

"So, what do you want us to do?" I asked.

"Hildebrand has informed us of a 'forbidden archive,'" Anastasius replied. "You understand the value of this information, I assume?"

He had just spoken at length about how much the country was suffering without the Grutrissheit, so I was well aware of how much the royal family wanted it. I could understand why they would want to grasp at straws and go after even a vague rumor floating through the Royal Academy.

Oh no... I just said that I'd do anything I could to help. Was I getting ahead of myself?!

I wouldn't have been able to escape a royal order either way... but even so, I couldn't shake the desire to put my head in my hands.

Tea Party for Bookworms

“I am surprised to see that you arrived ahead of me, Lady Rozemyne,” Hannelore said. “I specifically left my dormitory early so that I could apologize to the royal family.”

I gave her a stiff smile and replied, “I, too, had something to discuss with the royal family.” It would have been a little awkward to say that it hadn’t been my intention to arrive early and that the royals had specified an earlier time for me to come.

“Um, could it be that I interrupted something...?” Hannelore asked, starting to tremble at the thought of having made yet another mistake.

I shook my head with a smile, trying to calm her. “I simply thought to deliver Professor Eglantine’s hairpin before the tea party begins.”

“Indeed,” Eglantine said, also wearing a smile. “And now that you are here, Lady Hannelore, I would like for you to see it as well.”

I signaled Brunhilde with a glance, prompting her to give Anastasius’s attendant the box containing the hairpin. It needed to be thoroughly checked upon receipt, of course, so we all waited as the attendants went through this long and tedious process.

When the box was at last handed to Anastasius, he received it with a satisfied grin. “I hereby gift this hairpin to my beloved wife,” he said, setting it down in front of Eglantine.

Hannelore finally gave a relieved smile after seeing the peaceful exchange. “So you ordered a new hairpin as well, Prince Anastasius? My older brother also ordered one from Ehrenfest and is eagerly awaiting its arrival.”

“We received hairpin orders from Dunkelfelger, Ahrensbach, and the Sovereignty,” I said. “We even received one from Lady Detlinde, who is receiving hers as a gift from Ferdinand. The flowers she has asked to use are the same as Lady Adolphine’s but smaller. There are going to be five in total, each a different color.”

“Oh my. Five different hairpins?” Eglantine asked, surprised. She had responded just as I’d wanted, which meant it was time for stage two: explaining the details. At the very least, I needed the royal family to know there was nothing wrong with Ferdinand’s aesthetic sense; how people viewed the hairpins would depend entirely on how they were worn.

“Lady Detlinde proposed it herself, with the idea being that she can choose which of the five hairpins to wear according to the time, place, and what she is wearing. She, um... expressed a lack of confidence in Ehrenfest’s artistic sense and opted to take complete control.”

“Oh dear. I am satisfied with Ehrenfest’s designs and consider today’s hairpin quite wonderful indeed.”

“We are honored. I will inform my hairpin craftsperson of your kind words.”

Our conversation about hairpins continued until Solange and Hortensia arrived from the library.

I still can’t believe this woman is married to the Sovereign knight commander.

“I realize that Ehrenfest must think poorly of us, but I do hope you can get through this,” Hortensia said all of a sudden, wearing a sad smile that completely threw me off. “In the midst of what has been a time of great turmoil for the royal family, Prince Hildebrand came home with word of an Ehrenfest archduke candidate who knew of a forbidden archive. My husband, the knight commander, went to investigate this rumor—only to find that same archduke candidate in an otherwise empty library, with the diary of an executed librarian in her possession. That diary spoke of royals visiting the library, did it not? It is only natural that he would think Ehrenfest intends to steal that which belongs to the royal family.”

Especially when he knows that Ferdinand is a seed of Adalgisa and has royal blood.

Our timing seemed just plain terrible. If we hadn’t met in the library, then maybe we wouldn’t have drawn so much suspicion to ourselves and Ferdinand wouldn’t have been sent to Ahrensbach.

“It is my husband’s duty to treat all potential threats with the utmost caution,” Hortensia continued. “Anything less would make him a failure of a knight commander. I recognize that his suspicions earn him much ire, but we hope to resolve this as peacefully as possible, with all parties being the better for it. Please do understand this.”

I managed to put on a smile. It was hard to dispute her claim that the royal family had acted reasonably. Ferdinand hadn’t been arrested on the spot for his suspicious actions, even though his royal blood made him a particular source of concern; instead, he had simply been ordered to leave the temple and marry into a greater duchy. It was the kind of climb in status that anyone would envy.

If only that greater duchy hadn’t been Ahrensbach...

Ferdinand had instructed me to feign happiness, so I couldn’t say that their efforts had caused us naught but suffering. Instead, I gave her my most agreeable expression and said, “We all have our

circumstances, and there certainly are many times when our personal thoughts do not match the opinions of those around us.”

That concluded my short discussion with Hortensia.

Hildebrand arrived not long after, having been urged in by his head attendant, Arthur. We exchanged greetings, whereupon I noticed that he was delivering his lines more eloquently than last year. It warmed my heart, like seeing a younger cousin growing up.

“I was told that we would see each other much less often this year, as not even you have been able to finish all of your classes on the first day now that you are in your third year,” he said. “I am glad we have this opportunity to meet.”

“I am glad to see you as well,” I replied. “I have been ever so excited to see what books you will recommend.”

As my conversation with Hildebrand went on, Hortensia apologized to Hannelore. “We are truly sorry to have not kept you properly informed. It simply did not occur to us that you would be visiting the library often enough to take ownership of the tools.”

“Professor Hortensia has since taken ownership herself, so you may rest easy,” Solange added.

Hannelore looked genuinely relieved to hear this news; the whole situation must have really been bothering her. I gave a relieved sigh myself, then expressed my doubts to Hortensia.

“I mentioned this to Professor Eglantine before, but I find it strange that Lady Hannelore ended up the tools’ master when an archnoble librarian was supplying them with mana every day. How did this happen, exactly?”

“There were other tools that required mana. Schwartz and Weiss already had more than enough, so I deemed them less of a priority.”

“Are there any tools in the library more important than the two shumils? Considering how much they help with the borrowing and returning of reading materials, not to mention their work recording those who take books without permission, I can’t imagine there being any other tools that see more regular use.”

Hortensia gave a troubled expression, then turned to Eglantine and Anastasius. It was like she was seeking their assistance.

“Schwartz and Weiss are undeniably important for daily operations,” Anastasius said, “but Hortensia had other matters to attend to. By royal decree.”

“I imagine you are aware of the archive that can only be opened with the keys of archnoble librarians. They were mentioned in the documents that Professor Solange lent you, after all.”

Hortensia had evidently been tasked with opening the forbidden archive and searching it for the Grutrissheit—or any clues that might have suggested its location.

“The plan was for me to supply Schwartz and Weiss with mana after obtaining the keys,” Hortensia said, “but by the time I had removed the keys’ previous registrations and started taking ownership of them myself, I no longer had mana to spare. According to Solange and the diaries, there are three keys, and one archive requires all three to be opened. Thus, I tried to obtain them all, but it turns out that only one key can be owned per person.”

Having all three keys wasn’t enough; the archive also required three *people* with sufficient mana in order to be opened. Hortensia had apparently lost ownership of the first key after registering her mana with the second. On top of that, Solange lacked the proper mana or some other qualification required to own the keys, so she had not been able to register with one herself.

“Thus, we would like the Library Committee to become owners of the keys,” Hortensia concluded.

“Could you not summon more librarians from the Sovereignty?” I asked.

“As much as we would love to, we would struggle to gather three Sovereign archscholars in the Royal Academy to open an archive that might not even be important.”

Solange, Schwartz, and Weiss had proven themselves capable of managing the library’s daily workload, and the Sovereignty didn’t have enough manpower to spare three archscholars on top of that—especially when there was a chance that they wouldn’t accomplish anything of use. The royal family themselves had said that, unless there were any major discoveries, Hortensia would need to manage on her own.

“The archive has remained closed for some time now without issue. I believe the archduke candidates will find supplying the keys with mana to be less of a burden than supplying Schwartz or Weiss, but what do you think?” Solange asked, looking between Hannelore and me.

Anastasius nodded. “The plan is for the Sovereignty to take over supplying Schwartz and Weiss with mana so that responsibility will fall to Hortensia and Hildebrand. Hannelore, Rozemyne, we ask that you join Hortensia in taking ownership of the keys and assist her with opening the archive.” The library would naturally keep the keys, and we would only be summoned when we were needed. “Although you are busier now that you are third-years, opening a lock should not be much of an inconvenience. Continuing to supply the library’s magic tools would have a much greater impact on your classes.”

They were actually being considerate about the burden they were putting on us. Hannelore and I exchanged glances, then nodded and said, “Understood. We accept.”

Anastasius and the two librarians nodded in turn, at which point Hildebrand timidly interjected. "Um... just Rozemyne and Hannelore? Am I not going to own a key too?"

"You said that you wanted to supply Schwartz and Weiss with mana, did you not?" Anastasius asked.

"I did, but..." Hildebrand lowered his eyes. "I didn't think that would mean being left out like this."

"Even if you entered the archive, you would not be able to tell what books were inside."

Unable to protest any further, Hildebrand merely hung his head.

"Prince Anastasius, will I be allowed to read the archive's books?" I asked.

"The Library Committee will open the lock and nothing more. The rest is the duty of a librarian. We cannot have you looking around inside when not even we know what is in there."

Tch. And it's a whole new archive too.

I was being expected to open a veritable treasure trove of reading material, then do nothing but stand around outside. It was basically torture. That said, if the Grutrissheit really was inside, then it was probably best for me to keep well away rather than invite further misconceptions.

"I... I'll hold off on going inside. But if there are any books and documents that are safe for me to read, please allow me to see them."

"That should not be a problem once they have been checked."

From there, our serious discussions gave way to a more peaceful tea party. We lined up the various sweets we had brought and introduced them while taking demonstrative bites.

"This is the result of us purchasing Ehrenfest's pound cake and adding our duchy's rohres," Hannelore said. "We received some from Lady Rozemyne during last year's Interduchy Tournament, and it was so wonderfully delicious that we had our chefs experiment with it as well."

Dunkelfelger often pickled its rohres in wine, so the flavor of the cake was completely unique. "Is the wine different as well, I wonder?" I mused aloud. "This cake is delicious in its own distinct way. I think it's wonderful that we can enjoy the flavors of other duchies like this."

"I, too, look forward to the new sweets you bring each year," Solange said with a giggle as she reached for the yogurt mousse tart I had brought. There was rutreb jam spread atop the white mousse in an attractive pattern, making it a fancy-looking winter sweet.

"This white part often just tastes like plain yogurt, so you may add sweeter flavors as you please," I explained. The sweets from the Sovereignty looked cute, but they were way too sugary, as expected. I tried my best to get through them but only managed three bites of

each at most.

After enjoying the sweets and tea, our conversation turned to books.

Now this is a true bookworm tea party! It's so exciting!

"I found the knight stories easy to read even without having attended the Royal Academy," Hildebrand said. "I thoroughly enjoyed my time with them."

Our knight stories had come at the perfect point in his education. They had most likely been a bit of a challenge for him, but the beats of each tale had made him so excited and anxious that he had read through them all in a trance.

"I, too, want to put my all into giving a beautiful feystone to the woman I love," he continued. His purple eyes sparkled as he told us which knight stories were his favorite, and hearing him say that he wanted to grow stronger to slay feybeasts really made me think, "Wow, boys will be boys." Everyone else was looking on warmly as well.

"Lady Letizia is quite a delightful young woman," I said, "so I expect she will be overjoyed to receive a feystone from a wonderful boy such as yourself."

"Lady... Letizia?" he asked, blinking as though he hadn't understood me.

"You are engaged to Lady Letizia of Ahrensbach, are you not?" I asked in turn, looking at him quizzically. I was pretty sure their engagement had been announced during the Archduke Conference. "She came to the Ahrensbach-Ehrenfest border gate to welcome Ferdinand into her duchy. I spoke with her briefly, and she was rather adorable indeed."

"I... see. But I..."

I considered what was going on here. My first thought was that he simply wasn't used to the idea, since he hadn't met with Letizia since the engagement was announced... but then I remembered.

He has a crush on Charlotte!!!

Maybe he was feeling like his parents had trampled all over his first love by ordering him into an engagement with a girl whom he had never met. I panicked on the inside, trying to figure out how to approach this.

It would be weird for me to mention Charlotte out of nowhere. Plus, I'm sure he wouldn't want everyone here knowing about his first love, right? Aah, what should I do?! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to stomp on your first love! I wasn't thinking about how Mother would love to hear about this story!

"Um, Rozemyne. I—"

"I heard of your engagement as well," Hannelore said,

interrupting the prince without even realizing it. “Congratulations.”

At that, everyone else began congratulating him as well. Hildebrand ultimately gave a small smile while expressing his thanks. It seemed that he wasn’t unhappy with his engagement at all—he just hadn’t quite come to terms with it yet.

Whew.

Hannelore looked around and gave a teasing smile. “Everyone here has such wonderful partners. I feel somewhat left out.” It was true that she was the only one not married or engaged.

Hortensia giggled. “Oh, Lady Hannelore, but you are a third-year now. This is going to be the most exciting time for you, no? Do you not have your eye on a special someone?”

“Erm, well...” A hint of shyness graced Hannelore’s expression. “I wish to be courted by a man who would grant me a wonderful charm like the one Lady Rozemyne is wearing. Just like in Ehrenfest’s romance stories.”

All eyes gathered on my hair stick. I wiggled my head a bit, touched the rainbow feystones, and said, “It was designed by Ferdinand and given to me by Wilfried. My guardians all worked together to gather the feystones out of concern for my safety.” It was the perfect opportunity for me to stress that it was a present from my fiancé—and that Ferdinand’s fashion sense was completely normal.

“For feystones on this level to have been prepared for you, Ehrenfest must be treating you exceptionally well...” Eglantine said, staring at my rainbow hair stick.

I nodded with a smile. “They really are. They listen to my selfish requests, permit me to make books I love within the duchy, and even gave me a library.” I then indicated the books that I had brought with me to lend out to everyone.

“You have new books once again this year?” Professor Solange asked. “I received a copy of Ehrenfest’s love stories myself. It was quite entertaining trying to identify the stories I recognized; I would look back on my own days in the Royal Academy, which was truly nostalgic.”

“I am glad to hear you enjoyed them, Professor Solange. This year’s *Royal Academy Love Stories* is composed of tales gathered by the apprentice scholars of other duchies, so I expect they will be a lot harder to identify.”

Our stories thus far had come from Elvira and her friends, which meant they were mostly from Ehrenfest, and those that weren’t tended to be popular enough for everyone in the Royal Academy to be familiar with them anyway. However, the stories gathered for us by apprentice scholars looking to make a profit tended to be more obscure tales, as the apprentices wished to avoid overlap and secure

the most money possible. Naturally, there was no pattern to which duchies or generations these stories came from.

"I also have books for men, not just love stories," I continued. "There are ones about friendship blooming from treasure-stealing ditter. If you are interested, Prince Anastasius, I will gladly lend them to you."

"I am, but would it not be cruel to make Hildebrand wait?" Anastasius jabbed a thumb in the direction of the prince, who looked truly withered, like a dog that had been waiting for scraps but gotten none so far. There was normally only one copy of each book, so lending it to Anastasius would mean that Hildebrand had to wait.

However... fear not!

"I can lend you *both* the book," I said. "Brunhilde, Rihyarda, please distribute our copies of *Royal Academy Love Stories* and *A Ditter Story*."

"At once."

Brunhilde distributed Roderick's *A Ditter Story*, while Rihyarda distributed the new edition of *Royal Academy Love Stories*. We had been planning to debut the former during our tea party with Dunkelfelger, but there had been a change of plans, since these were the only new books that we expected would interest Anastasius and Hildebrand.

Your first readers are members of the royal family, Roderick! Wow!

I glanced to the side and saw Roderick standing in the corner, looking unbearably uncomfortable. I could tell from his expression that he was both eager and terrified about seeing how everyone reacted.

"Lady Rozemyne, are these not exactly the same books?" Eglantine asked, fluttering her eyelids.

"Indeed they are. The process of making identical books is known as 'printing,' and Ehrenfest intends to make printed goods its central industry. We are planning to sell books about Dunkelfelger's history in this same manner, although we will not be releasing those right away, as they must check the contents themselves."

Solange and Hortensia compared their books and voiced their surprise at even the illustrations being identical.

"I see that the contents are all neat and orderly, but can you not do something about the cover?" Anastasius asked, flipping through the pages with a clear grimace. As always, nobles weren't fond of books that bucked the trend of having ornately decorated covers.

"The flower-covered pages technically serve that purpose," I explained. "I assume that you and Lady Hannelore would rather something more traditional though, correct? As the string binding can easily be undone, you should have no trouble bringing the pages to a

workshop and ordering a cover of your own preference.”

“Hmm...” Anastasius was still looking at the book in dissatisfaction. It may have been his first time seeing one without its cover.

“Think of this as Ehrenfest selling the *contents* of a book rather than a book in its entirety. By not including a fancy cover, the cost can be kept low enough that even laynobles and mednobles can afford them.”

“That is delightfully considerate,” said Solange, a mednoble herself.

Hannelore similarly smiled at the Ehrenfest book in her hands. “These are light and comfortable to hold, and the pages themselves are easy to turn. I quite adore them.” She glanced over at the thick Dunkelfelger books she had brought with her. “I find them much more agreeable than books I can only read with the assistance of my attendants or scholars.”

“I know what you mean,” Hildebrand added. “They’re so much more manageable than those big, thick books that have to be placed on a reading stand, aren’t they?”

Books so big they need a reading stand...? What the heck?! Let me read them!

I started to lean forward, eager to hear more, but Brunhilde stealthily brought me back from where she was standing behind me. I checked my necklace’s feystone to make sure it hadn’t changed color, then readjusted my posture.

“Now, how shall these be lent?”

Ehrenfest could give everyone copies of the same book, but, as expected, nobody else could do the same. Status decided the order in which we would act, and from there, the book exchange began. What ended up coming my way was a book that Solange had brought from a closed-stack archive.

“You have plentiful mana, right, Lady Rozemyne?” she said. “This is a book that was moved to a closed-stack archive for long-term storage, but its pages contain many unusual magic circles. It was apparently written by a professor who studied Schwartz and Weiss long ago. Perhaps you will find it enriching.”

“I thank you.”

By copying out this book and getting Ferdinand or Hirschur to research it, I was sure we could make our own versions of Schwartz and Weiss for my library. I wanted to read it right away, but that simply wasn’t an option; the books were exchanged by our retainers, so it wasn’t actually in front of me.

“Um, do you enjoy reading difficult books, Rozemyne?” Hildebrand asked gingerly. His eyes shifted to the book he was

borrowing from Hortensia, which his head attendant, Arthur, was currently holding. “A book such as this will take me quite some time to read, so you are more than welcome to have it first.”

In a shocking twist, Hildebrand was willing to lend me the book that he was borrowing himself. Holding back my urge to leap at the opportunity, I gazed up at Arthur and said, “May I, um... Would it be okay for me to borrow the book in his place?”

“Prince Hildebrand is quite fond of Ehrenfest books. He reads them over and over again. This one here”—he indicated the book in his hand—“is a little more complicated, so someone of your reading level is bound to find it more enjoyable. Do lend us more Ehrenfest books when they are made.”

I eagerly nodded in response, then turned my attention back to Hildebrand. “I thank you ever so much, Prince Hildebrand.”

“I’m just glad to see you happy, Rozemyne.”

Oh my gosh. What a good kid!

After this exchange, I received my payment for having agreed to take ownership of one of the archive’s keys: a book that Anastasius had brought from the royal palace. That made for three books in total—an impressive haul for a single tea party. But while I was giddy with excitement, eager to leave and delve into my new treasures, Anastasius was comparing Ehrenfest’s book to his other one.

“Rozemyne, does Ehrenfest only have thin books like this? It exudes poverty. If you will not attach covers, at least make them thicker.”

“They are bound with string, so they can only be so thick. Thus, we are competing in quantity.” I then turned to Brunhilde, who nodded and joined Rihyarda in distributing Elvira’s most recent volume: *The Story of Fernestine*.

This new book had come about from Elvira putting her stormy feelings about Ferdinand’s engagement on paper. Of course, the actual story couldn’t be published outright, so she had changed the protagonist’s gender—among many other things—while writing. The end product was the tale of Fernestine, a young woman whose mother had died prematurely, leaving her to be raised humbly alongside an attendant assigned to her by her father.

Just as Fernestine’s baptism was drawing near, her father came to get her and brought her back to none other than the archduke’s castle. In a shocking twist, she had been an archduke candidate all along. She then entered the Royal Academy, whereupon she began to stand out due to her feminine beauty and excellent grades. Some archduke candidates attempted to bully her out of envy... but it was nothing compared to the merciless mistreatment she had already been receiving from her stepmother.

It was at the Royal Academy that Fernestine first experienced freedom from her stepmother. It was also where she and a prince fell in love. But alas, as Fernestine was an archduke candidate without a mother, her romance was hotly protested—so much so that the king ultimately intervened, separating the couple by ordering that she be married into a greater duchy. It wasn't just any greater duchy, though—it was the same one that her stepmother was from, and the man that Fernestine was to marry bore her stepmother's likeness.

Even then, the first prince refused to give up on Fernestine, knowing that she wept over the king's decree. He pulled one trick after another in order to save her. At first, Fernestine refused his help, saying that he was only getting in her way... but when the prince painstakingly convinced the king to permit their marriage, she willingly took his hand.

That was the gist. No matter how convenient it seemed, the heroine had to be rescued in the end.

Of course, Sylvester had immediately noticed that Fernestine was just a gender-swapped Ferdinand. He had guffawed and praised Elvira for doing something so fearless, but only those closest to Ferdinand were able to see the connection. Even in Ehrenfest, only a few noticed.

Incidentally, both *A Ditter Story* and *The Story of Fernestine* were long-form series that wouldn't fit into single volumes. We were having to print them piecemeal, so the complete product took longer to make.

I gazed across all the excited faces clinging to their new books and smirked. This was just step one of my magnificent plan.

Everyone, get infected with a lust for the next volumes of your favorite series! Just like me! Spread forth, my bookworm virus!

I had come to this tea party on edge about interacting with royalty... but in the end, it was much more fun than I had ever expected.

Tea Party with Dunkelfelger

“I am beyond pleased that you made it through the tea party without falling unconscious, milady, but simply writing that you had fun will not do. There is much you must report to Aub Ehrenfest before reading the books you have borrowed, is there not?”

Upon returning to the dormitory, my first instinct had been to delve into my stash of new books—which had earned me a few choice words from Rihyarda. I would have rather remembered only the enjoyable parts of our tea party, but apparently that wouldn’t fly.

“I will write the report in my hidden room.” I stood up with a sigh, then headed there as stated. I was also going to be writing to Ferdinand. The most important things to mention were the royal family asking me to be the High Bishop for Prince Sigiswald and Adolphine’s Starbind Ceremony and the Library Committee’s new job looking after the forbidden archive’s keys.

I wrote my letter to Ferdinand first, putting all of the most sensitive details in disappearing ink. At the end, I added, “They said they’ll let me read whatever’s in the locked archive after the librarian has checked over it. Eheheh.”

Next, while the disappearing ink on my first letter was drying, I penned my report to Sylvester. It was largely the same as my letter to Ferdinand, with the main difference being a small addition at the very end: “I asked the royal family to get your permission, so do all that you can to put them in your debt.”

By the time I was done, the disappearing ink on my first letter had dried. I wrote a bland message over it with normal ink, talking about the sweets at the tea party, the books I was lent, and so on. After some thought, I elected to avoid mentioning the books that I’d given out myself.

Ferdinand wouldn’t scold me about those anyway, right? Right.

I reread my letter to Ferdinand multiple times, then sealed it, picked up my report, and exited my hidden room with both papers in hand.

The day after our tea party for bookworms, plans for another tea party arrived from Dunkelfelger; it seemed their aub had granted them permission for the joint research. Brunhilde came with a letter of invitation.

“They are asking to hold the tea party in the morning two days from now,” she explained. “Furthermore, Lord Lestilaut is going to participate, so they have asked for Lord Wilfried to attend as well.”

Lestilaut would be present to discuss our joint research and the delivery of the hairpin he had ordered, but it would be awkward with him as the only boy. I turned to Wilfried, who was with me in the common room, and said, “You have no classes that day, correct? Will you be joining us?”

“I know just how awkward it is being the only boy at a tea party for girls, so... yes, I’ll be going. Not to mention, I need to help with this joint research too.”

Back in our first year, Wilfried had been forced to attend a bunch of tea parties for girls while I was in Ehrenfest for the Dedication Ritual. Remembering his awkward suffering from back then had made him sympathetic for Lestilaut’s plight.

“Furthermore,” Brunhilde continued, “Dunkelfelger’s knights seem highly interested in *A Ditter Story*. They are asking to borrow it.”

That was fine; we had been intending to show Dunkelfelger first anyway.

And so, I spent the run-up to our tea party deciding what sweets we would bring and other precise details with Wilfried and his attendants. I also took the apprentice scholars who would be doing the collaborative research to Gundolf’s lab to introduce them, then made my way to Hirschur’s lab to give Raimund my new letter for Ferdinand. I prompted him to encourage a fast response.

“I thank you ever so much for inviting us,” I said upon arriving at the tea party. Wilfried and our retainers were with me, as well as several scholars—more than we would usually bring with us, since we were going to be discussing our joint research project. Muriella was here too, even though she hadn’t given her name yet.

“Lord Wilfried. Lady Rozemyne. We’ve been waiting. Please come this way.”

Hannelore and Lestilaut welcomed us, and we exchanged lengthy greetings before taking our recommended seats. It just so happened that I could see Clarissa from where I was sitting. I glanced at Roderick and gave a curt nod, prompting him to give her Hartmut’s letter.

All we’re doing is communicating in the Royal Academy, but everything takes so much time. So many days have passed already, and I’m guessing it’s going to be even longer before Ferdinand gets back to me.

Lestilaut cleared his throat, then fixed me with a glare. “Now, might I see the hairpin I ordered?” Why was it that he seemed so annoyed...?

Hannelore gave an exasperated sigh. “Brother, I understand your enthusiasm, but you can at least wait for the tea party to begin.”

So his cocky, irritated attitude was actually his way of masking his anxiousness and impatience. I almost laughed out loud at this realization—though actually doing so would have been rude, so I tensed my stomach in an attempt to keep the laughter contained.

“Brunhilde, the hairpin,” I said. There was no harm in letting him see it now, especially when he was so unmistakably eager.

Brunhilde handed the box containing the hairpin to one of Lestilaut’s attendants, who checked it and its contents before passing it to their lord. The process was boring and tedious, but it needed to be done. I was intimately aware of the danger of poison.

Still, the process was a long one, and there was nothing for me to do, so I subtly watched Lestilaut. I was pretty sure that only those very close to him had deduced that his irritated, displeased attitude was just him being anxious. He had put on a noble smile without issue during our greetings, which was why his apparent displeasure was so noticeable.

Once he finally had the hairpin in hand, Lestilaut furrowed his brow and started investigating its every detail. He had ordered flowers to suit the divine colors of autumn. The main flower, which reminded me of a dahlia, started red at the center and gradually turned yellow toward the petals. It was surrounded by what looked like tea olives and decorated with round, colorful—and presumably autumnal—fruit.

The hairpin looked as though it had been made exactly according to the illustration, but would it meet the standards of the cultured and profoundly sharp-eyed Lestilaut? I watched him carefully... and soon enough, his stern expression gave way to a momentary flash of satisfaction.

“Hmph. It is not bad.”

“My brother means to say that he has found nothing to criticize,” Hannelore explained, but I could tell that Lestilaut was satisfied just by looking at him.

“The flowers and fruit you requested are not found in Ehrenfest, Lord Lestilaut, so the craftswoman who made your hairpin said it was a valuable learning experience,” I noted. “She also said that you have excellent taste.”

Lestilaut gave a short chuckle. “If she reproduced flowers and fruit she has never seen before, then she must be even better than I expected.” He then gave me a scrutinizing look that seemed to say, “I like your craftswoman, so give her to me.”

I smiled. “Your praise honors us. I take great pride in my craftswoman and entrust the creation of all my hairpins to her.”

And no matter how much you want Tuuli, she works for me. I’ll never

give her to anyone.

Lestilaut was giving me his usual glare, which I took to mean that he found me “cheeky” or “cocky” for rebuffing him, but there were some things that I just wouldn’t budge on.

I decided to move our conversation along, maintaining the same pleasant smile. “As you are satisfied with the hairpin, let us move on to discussing Dunkelfelger’s history—”

“Hold on, Rozemyne,” Wilfried interjected. “You always prattle on forever once the topic turns to books. We should discuss the joint research first.”

I turned to look at Wilfried and saw that he was just setting down his cup. Hannelore must have taken her first sip while I was talking to Lestilaut, and now the both of them were enjoying their tea.

“We’ll need to discuss the history book eventually,” I protested. “It’s an important topic.”

“Sure, but you tend to lose sight of everything else when books are involved. We should save it for later.”

Unable to argue—Wilfried had more than enough evidence to prove that he was right—I resigned myself to talking about the joint research first. But I wanted tea and sweets before that. I picked up a Dunkelfelger pastry at Hannelore’s recommendation—a cream-covered galette with wine-soaked rohres—and took a bite. It had a rustic flavor that I just loved.

“You mentioned wanting to eat rohres in this manner before, did you not?” Hannelore asked me. She had evidently heard my mumbling about how I would make a sweet like this if we had access to rohres and jumped at the chance.

“I thank you ever so much for remembering a stray comment of mine.”

“So she really does like sweets of this manner...” Lestilaut said to himself. He had apparently been opposed to serving them, saying that they were ill-suited for a Royal Academy tea party. Hannelore had forged ahead anyway, though, arguing that she had prepared sweets that their guests would enjoy.

“Lady Hannelore, I can feel your kindness and consideration overflowing from this tea party,” I said. “It truly fills me with joy.”

Wilfried nodded in agreement. “I also like your duchy’s sweets more than the sugar-hardened ones served in the Sovereignty.”

“I am glad you both enjoy them,” Hannelore replied with a smile.

“Dunkelfelger’s food is made with the best ingredients,” Lestilaut added with a sniff. “So, how do you expect this joint research to develop? Our apprentice knights certainly have a high rate of receiving Angriff’s divine protection, but not everyone actually does.”

“We already have a hypothesis,” I explained. “We just need to ask

you and your apprentice knights a few questions to help us prove it. For example, have you noticed a difference between pre-ritual students who performed poorly in their written lessons and regularly prayed to the gods during their practical lessons, and those who did well in their written lessons and passed immediately? Or between archnobles who had enough mana to fill the entire circle and laynobles who did not? I also wish to know which ceremonies are done and how often, among other things.”

At that, Lestilaut called over and then took something from one of his scholars. “My father has given me permission to show you the ceremonies we perform before and after dinner. *However*, there are two conditions. One, our duchies must play a serious match. There would be no need for the ceremonies otherwise, and, as we are praying to the gods for success, it is out of the question for us to not play at all.”

“The ceremony that Dunkelfelger archduke candidates perform is held after a match, and we can hardly offer up mana without doing anything first,” Hannelore added. I could tell that she was feeling concerned for us but also thought it obvious that a game of dinner needed to be played to justify the ceremonies.

Is this really happening?! I can't believe we need to play dinner for joint research!

I could only blink in disbelief. Maybe I was naive for not having expected this—we were talking about Dunkelfelger, after all—but the possibility hadn't even crossed my mind.

“We are the ones who proposed this research,” Wilfried said. “For that reason, we have no choice but to accept.”

Upon hearing this, the Dunkelfelger apprentice knights in attendance all seemed to brighten up considerably. In stark contrast, I was hanging my head, dejected.

“We will not be able to play dinner until our apprentice knights and the apprentice scholars due to be involved in the joint research have finished enough of their classes,” Lestilaut noted. “Simple questions will suffice for the time being.”

“Professor Rauffen is quite enthusiastic about this joint research,” Hannelore added. “If you contact him by ordonnanz, he will invite you to the knight dormitory and answer any questions you may have.”

I nodded at them, then asked, “And the second condition?” I really couldn't imagine anything more troublesome than having to play dinner, so I was ready for anything.

Lestilaut cleared his throat a second time. “You are to show us your ceremonies as well.”

“My ceremonies?”

“Yes. If one obtains divine protections through performing ceremonies at the temple, then you must have performed them as

well, no? We ask that you include the ceremonies that blessed the Saint of Ehrenfest with such an abundance of divine protections in our research, and that you perform them before Hannelore and me.”

In other words: Dunkelfelger was going to publicize its historic ceremonies, so it was only natural that Ehrenfest do the same. I didn’t really mind that, but I also wasn’t sure what they wanted to see.

“The temple has many traditional ceremonies,” I said. “There are the baptism ceremony, the coming-of-age ceremony, and the Starbind Ceremony, to name a few. What exactly would you like to see?

Blessings related to the milestones of one’s life require people to be blessed, and the rest are prayers for abundant harvests meant for farming towns. They are not well suited for the Royal Academy.”

“There is no need to go to such lengths. We simply wish to know the manner in which you pray.”

A ceremony that I can do in the Royal Academy, hm...?

The only one that came to mind was regenerating our gathering spot, but that wasn’t exactly something for me to be showing off. It was a tough decision.

“I shall think about which ceremony to show,” I said.

“You do that. I want to see you acting a bit more like a saint for once.”

“Brother!” Hannelore exclaimed. She glared at Lestilaut, but he merely turned his head away.

“Incidentally, can I ask that you select Clarissa as one of the apprentice scholars helping with our joint research?” I asked.

Clarissa started nodding over and over again, her eyes sparkling with delight. Lestilaut caught sight of this, then turned to me and said, “Why?”

“Our main reason is her existing connection to Ehrenfest, since she is engaged to my retainer Hartmut. Furthermore, I am confident she will take research that is due to improve the reputation of the temple very seriously. Reason being... Hartmut is now our High Priest.”

“What?!” Lestilaut shouted. “You mean to say he entered the temple?! What foul act did he commit?!” His reaction didn’t come as too much of a surprise—entering the temple was still considered a source of great shame among nobles—but the “foul act” part caught me a little off guard.

“Hartmut did nothing wrong. Rather, his new position is because of Ferdinand’s departure from Ehrenfest.”

Lestilaut’s face twisted in a way that indicated a complete lack of understanding. I would clearly need to elaborate.

“Prior to his departure, Ferdinand assisted me with my High Bishop work as the High Priest. However, as you know, he is being

married into Ahrensbach. This left us without a High Priest until Hartmut was chosen to fill the role.”

“So, in Ehrenfest, one really can be sent to the temple and made High Priest without committing any misdeeds...” Lestilaut muttered. The nearby Dunkelfelger students appeared to be thinking the same thing.

“I cannot speak for the temple in a greater duchy such as yours,” Wilfried said, “but, embarrassingly enough, our own temple has very few blue priests. We do not have enough to fill our chalices, so we assigned Rozemyne and my uncle to be the High Bishop and High Priest, respectively. This was so that they could perform the ceremonies. Charlotte and I similarly participate in Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival throughout our Central District. In other words, the temple is like a second home to us and the rest of our archducal family.”

“I see...” Lestilaut replied under his breath, still wearing a frown.

“I anticipate that society’s view of the temple will improve if we can show that the frequency, contents, and sincerity of one’s prayers has an effect on obtaining divine protections,” I said. “Thus, if Clarissa wishes to continue her engagement to Hartmut despite his new position, then I would appreciate her assistance.”

Lestilaut turned to Clarissa. “Well? What will you do? Your engagement can easily be canceled if you just express that Hartmut is a man who would join the temple despite already having a fiancée in another duchy.”

Clarissa vigorously shook her head in refusal, causing her long braid to swish from side to side. “I could never scorn his decision. I am *proud* that he would enter the temple without hesitation for his lady.” She then broke into a radiant smile that made her resemble Hartmut terribly. “In fact, had I been in Ehrenfest at the time, I would have battled him for the position of High Priest myself.”

I met this proclamation with wide eyes, not wanting it to be true.

“Lady Rozemyne, please allow me to work on this research,” Clarissa continued, a distinct glimmer in her blue eyes. She balled her hand into a determined fist, crushing her letter from Hartmut in the process. “These apologetic words are not even worth reading. No matter what my family says, I will charge down my own path and take him as my husband. And then, I shall witness the Saint of Ehrenfest perform her ceremonies with my very own eyes!”



It sounds like Clarissa is saying exactly what Hartmut would say in this situation... but surely I must be imagining things.

I swallowed my shock and looked at everyone else from Dunkelfelger. Not a single one of them looked surprised; in fact, they were acting like this was entirely normal for Clarissa.

Lestilaut rolled his eyes in a show of annoyance and said, “Ehrenfest will need to keep a firm grip on her reins. We refuse to take responsibility for her actions going forward.”

“Hold on just a moment. Isn’t she from Dunkelfelger?!” I cried, more or less pleading for them to reconsider.

Clarissa gave a shy smile, as if embarrassed about something. “I may still live in Dunkelfelger, Lady Rozemyne... but in my heart, I am already your loyal vassal through and through.” She pressed her hands against her cheeks and wiggled in her seat like a girl who had just confessed to her crush.

No matter how much I racked my brain, I had absolutely no idea how to respond to this. I turned to Brunhilde and Leonore for help, hoping that they could restore some semblance of order, but Brunhilde merely coughed and put on a fake smile. I could tell that she had wanted to say, “Oh, gods... Now there are two of them.”

Lestilaut waved a hand at me, seeming no less annoyed after Clarissa’s impassioned speech. “Go on, Rozemyne. Stop her already.”

Wait, what? You expect me to sort this out?! Even though she’s one of your duchy’s apprentice scholars?!

My eyes wandered the room; I was at a complete loss and desperate for someone to save me.

“He has a point,” Wilfried said. “If she is already your vassal at heart, then is the onus not on you?”

I frowned. Interrupting our tea party to have a one-on-one conversation with Clarissa felt rude to Hannelore and Lestilaut, who had invited us in the first place. But at the same time, they were the ones telling me to do something. I supposed there wasn’t much else I could do.

“May I have just a moment to speak with Clarissa, then?”

Hannelore gave Clarissa a troubled look, then turned to me and said, “My sincerest apologies, but we leave her to you, Lady Rozemyne. Any time she gets in this state, our voices seldom reach her...” Did that mean Clarissa was always giving such passionate speeches in the Dunkelfelger Dormitory? It was a scary thought.

I turned to Brunhilde. “Her gift, if you would.”

“Understood.”

We had with us a hairpin that Hartmut wanted us to give to Clarissa if she didn’t cancel their engagement. The other girls had

informed us that it was best to give these things sooner rather than later so that the woman receiving the hairpin could decide on clothes and a hairstyle that would suit it best.

Our original plan had been to discreetly give Clarissa the hairpin after the tea party, but there seemed to be no end to her preaching in sight; at least by presenting her with it now we could ask her to return to her room to admire it there. She had been calm and quiet not too long ago, and this would restore the peace. That was what I was hoping for, anyway.

Brunhilde pulled back my chair so that I could stand up, and then I leisurely walked over to Clarissa. Her mouth stopped flapping when she saw me, and she immediately started focusing on my every move. The whole room had gone silent, and I could tell that all eyes were on us.

“Clarissa,” I said, extending a hand to her. She snapped back to reality and dropped to her knees at once. “I understand your feelings all too well. I am glad beyond words that you respect Hartmut’s decision to enter the temple and not run from his duty.”

“Lady Rozemyne...”

“Thus, I offer you this gift. If you still see Hartmut, the Ehrenfest High Priest, as your future husband, then please accept this hairpin from him. It is to be worn at your graduation ceremony.”

Clarissa accepted the box, tears welling in her eyes.

“However,” I continued, “I would ask that you return to your room to open it.” I made a point to look at Hannelore and Lestilaut, the latter of which immediately understood the meaning behind my gaze.

“Clarissa,” he said, “you may leave for today.”

“No, I don’t think I will. I should like to stay here until the very end—to burn Lady Rozemyne’s visage into mine eyes.”

“Then shut up and stand in the corner. You’re interrupting us.” He shooed Clarissa into the literal corner of the room, then sighed. It seemed that we had at last soothed the beast.

I gave a relieved sigh and returned to my seat.

“I see you have excellent control over her,” Lestilaut remarked.

“Unfortunately, I already have experience with her type. Um, if we have nothing else to discuss regarding the joint research, may we talk about the Dunkelfelger history book?”

“Indeed,” Hannelore said. “My brother and father are very much looking forward to the finished product.” She then smiled, prompting me to continue.

Wilfried turned to his lined-up scholars and called over Ignaz, who then handed an advance copy of the book to one of the Dunkelfelger apprentice scholars. After the usual checks, it ended up

in Lestilaut's hands.

Lestilaut began flipping through the book. He looked particularly stern, but that wasn't much of a concern for us; our greatest priority was getting approval from Aub Dunkelfelger.

Wilfried turned away from Lestilaut, who was so focused on the book that he had probably blocked us out entirely, and instead spoke to Hannelore. "If all is well with the book, then we intend to sell others just like it. We shall await Aub Dunkelfelger's response at the Archduke Conference."

"Understood. I will tell the aub as much," Hannelore replied, accepting the duty with a smile. She glanced at Lestilaut, who was still absorbed in the book, and ordered a second round of tea for us all.

As we sipped at our drinks, Hannelore told me more about the book. "Your modern translation has had a great impact on Dunkelfelger."

"Oh my. Truly?" I asked. "In what way?"

"As you know, we study Yurgenschmidt history here in the Royal Academy, but we never delve into the finer details of our own duchies. As a result, it is quite common for a noble not of the archducal family to know very little of their own duchy's history. This was the case in Dunkelfelger as well—that is, until the appearance of a certain history book. Your writing is so easy to read and understand that not just adults but even children have managed to learn from it."

That's news to me. I'd thought it was pretty common for nobles to know their history.

After going through my intense studying regimen with Ferdinand, I had come to assume that every noble knew their duchy's history. In truth, however, this wasn't the case.

Every archduke candidate was taught the history of their duchy, since such information was considered essential to their future. Those in branch families could similarly learn from their parents or grandparents, assuming they were archnobles, and children of the same age with close relationships to members of the archducal family—such as foster siblings—could simply be taught together.

"Furthermore," Hannelore continued, "our duchy's history stretches back so far, and our historical texts are by no means easy to understand. Children find it quite a struggle, as do those marrying into our archducal family from other duchies."

"Has nobody else translated it all into modern language?" I asked. If reading the text was really such an issue, then surely they could have gotten a scholar of their own to translate it.

"Those in our archducal family have, but the text rarely survives. It is said to be our duty to preserve and pass on the old words."

"That is a respectable attitude. If one does not focus and work

hard to remember languages of old, then they risk being forgotten and abandoned. That is precisely why prayer rituals have survived and been passed down for so long.”

“Your praise honors us,” Hannelore said. She gave me a vague smile, then clapped her hands together as though she had suddenly remembered something. “Do you know that the king’s third wife is from Dunkelfelger? She praised your translation as truly wonderful, Lady Rozemyne, and she seems enthusiastic about buying it once it goes on sale.”

The king’s third wife is Prince Hildebrand’s mother, right? Dunkelfelger sure does have a strong connection to the royal family—though I guess that’s to be expected for a greater duchy. Having them publicize the book will do a lot more for sales than Ehrenfest ever could on its own.

“It is an honor for the royal family to have graced our book with their time,” I said. “If you find even the smallest detail that you would rather not be published, then please say so at once. We will see to its swift removal.”

Dunkelfelger had an incredibly long history; it seemed reasonable to assume that there were one or two parts that they would want to keep hidden from other duchies. I spoke out of consideration for the royal family themselves, but Lestilaut instantly looked up from his reading.

“What are you saying? I do not know how things are in Ehrenfest, but there is nothing in our history for us to hide or be ashamed of.”

I found that extremely hard to believe, but still—the fact that he made no attempt to hide anything even from royalty was pretty impressive, and his ability to make such a declaration so flatly was the mark of a good archduke candidate.

Lord Lestilaut may have the soul of an artist, but he’s still a true Dunkelfelgerian in every sense of the word.

As I nodded, feeling impressed, Wilfried stepped into our conversation. “So, how is the advance copy?” he asked Lestilaut.

“Not bad. I appreciate that there are illustrations at points, unlike in the previous version. It might have been even better if you had added color and made them more ornate, but as they were drawn in a style meant for black and white to begin with, it is not much of a problem.”

From there, all that Lestilaut did was praise the art. It was clear to see that he had actually been examining Wilma’s illustrations, not the text itself.

“It is the work of my personal artist,” I said. “Your praise honors me.”

“Your personal artist...? Does this person draw pictures of you, then?”

Lestilaut seemed fairly interested in Wilma's art—an unsurprising development, considering that he was something of an artist himself. I wasn't quite sure how to answer his question, though; I had only ever gone into Wilma's room once, and that had been when it was overflowing with illustrations of Ferdinand. I felt like maybe I had seen a couple of myself in their midst.

"This was several years ago now, but I recall seeing an illustration she drew of me singing. There might have been one of me playing the harspiel as well, though I cannot quite remember. She is rather busy with the illustrations for our novels these days, so I can't imagine she has the leeway to draw much else of me."

"I see..." Lestilaut replied, his eyes wandering back down to the book in disappointment. Wilma really had piqued his interest with her illustrations—a fitting achievement for one of my attendants.

"Would you care to read *A Ditter Story* too?" I asked.

In an instant, the apprentice knights all started buzzing with excitement—perhaps for the same reason that Lestilaut was now wearing a harder expression.

"This first volume is centered around treasure-stealing ditter," I continued. "Thus, I would very much like to hear the thoughts of those from Dunkelfelger."

"You may count on us," said every single Dunkelfelger student at once. And not just the knights either—the scholars and attendants too. It was clear just how deep their obsession with ditter ran. I didn't even want to think about it.

"The author wrote this story while referencing Ferdinand's notes on treasure-stealing ditter," I noted, "but as our generation does not truly understand the game, it may be inaccurate at parts."

I had personally reviewed the text and pointed out any mistakes and contradictions that I noticed, but I didn't know what academy-wide treasure-stealing ditter was like, so my fact-checking was most likely imperfect.

If everyone hadn't been so busy with Ferdinand's engagement and the purge, then I could have gotten more people to check it as well...

Lestilaut accepted the book and then started looking through it. "Let's see... Hm? Are there no illustrations for this one?"

Wilma was responsible for all the illustrations we needed in the Rozemyne Workshop, but there wasn't a single one in *A Ditter Story*. This may have seemed unusual at first, but there was no helping it.

"My personal artist is a commoner," I explained, "so she cannot draw illustrations for a book set in the Royal Academy about a game that only nobles play."

Lestilaut nodded his understanding. "Only a noble would be able to draw such things."

This was a pretty severe issue for us; stories were easy enough to gather, but artists were another matter entirely. I didn't have a clue whom to speak to or what to do to get more.

"We would ask a noble with a knack for art to draw the illustrations for us, but Ehrenfest does not have any ideal candidates..." I said with a sigh, even making a note of my attempts to train new artists.

Lestilaut gave me a look of displeasure.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"Um, Lady Rozemyne," Hannelore said timidly, "my brother is quite a talented artist."

Somehow, I deduced that Lestilaut was offering himself as a candidate. "As far as I can tell from your hairpin design, Lord Lestilaut, you are very skilled indeed. If you were to draw the illustrations, then I am certain they would capture the attention of all those who see them."

I really did think he was a splendid artist capable of producing very realistic pieces, and having a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate doing illustrations for us would do wonders for our marketing. No matter how much I wanted to welcome him aboard, however, he was an archduke candidate.

"That said," I continued, "we cannot actually ask for your assistance. Good communication is necessary for endeavors such as this, but you are soon to graduate, and there will not be an easy way for you to come to Ehrenfest after leaving the Royal Academy."

I could invite a laynoble or mednoble illustrator to Ehrenfest after their graduation, but an archduke candidate would only be able to leave their duchy through an engagement. And that certainly wasn't in the cards for Lestilaut, the future Aub Dunkelfelger.

"A shame," I concluded, hanging my head.

A look of extreme displeasure flashed across Lestilaut's face, then he returned to the usual expression he wore while socializing. He was either greatly disappointed or immensely angry; I couldn't tell which.

"Rozemyne," Wilfried said, "could you not just get the illustrations from Lady Hannelore? That way, Lord Lestilaut could continue to provide drawings for us until we graduate. It shouldn't take him too long to make what we need for *A Ditter Story*—and if we start publicizing his art, then it might become easier for us to find other artists too."

Lestilaut's head shot up at once. "That is not a bad idea." His brow was furrowed, but there was an unmistakable sparkle in his red eyes.

He's super into the idea! He's frowning a little, sure, but this is definitely the face he makes when he's excited.

"At the very least, we'll need to consult the aub..."

“Is it any different from you buying stories? You’ll just be commissioning art instead.”

“Wilfried!” I exclaimed, calling out so frantically that my voice cracked. But it was too late; Lestilaut’s lips had already curved into a grin.

“Ehrenfest is already doing such things?” he asked. “Then my involvement will not cause any problems whatsoever.”

Gathering stories was a part-time job meant for laynobles without any money; it wasn’t something to be done by archduke candidates. I intended to buy art from mednobles and laynobles in the same way, so I didn’t really want Lestilaut getting involved.

“Um, Lady Rozemyne... could you please make your decision after seeing my brother’s art? We will need to see whether it matches the story being told,” Hannelore said. She then sighed, glanced at Lestilaut and Wilfried, and muttered, “There is no stopping him now.”

Indeed, the two boys were already flipping through *A Ditter Story* and discussing which scenes should have illustrations. I could see the attendants and guard knights standing behind Lestilaut straining to peer at the text as well. I could already imagine Sylvester crying out, “Hold on! Why is this happening?!” but things had already progressed too far. At this point, he had no choice but to roll with the punches.

Good luck, my dear adoptive father! It’s not my fault this time. And yay for you, Roderick! Your first reader from outside Ehrenfest is a member of the royal family, and your first artist is an archduke candidate from a greater duchy! I bet you’re glad you used a pen name, huh?!

“I request five illustrations per volume,” I said. “I cannot buy more.”

“Five, hm...? That sounds difficult,” Lestilaut said. He started flipping through the text again with a serious expression, reading out whatever scenes Wilfried suggested as someone who had already read the book.

As the two boys hyped themselves up, Hannelore and I exchanged looks and shrugged. “After seeing Lord Lestilaut’s interest in both the Dunkelfelger history book and this ditter story, I must conclude that *both* Dunkelfelger archduke candidates are bookworms,” I said.

“I-Indeed,” Hannelore added. “I, too, am having an excellent time reading *Royal Academy Love Stories*. Ohohoho...”

And so, we began discussing which scenes we liked the most. Hannelore told me how her heart had throbbed in the moments when characters fell in love—and it was through her gushing that I came to better understand Elvira’s divine symbolism.

So, Bluanfah the Goddess of Sprouts showing up means love has sprouted. Okay. Got it.

She showed up all the time in Elvira’s stories, so I had been

wondering what the heck she symbolized. As it turned out, she represented the start of romance.

But is that actually right? I mean, sometimes Bluanfah appears, like, five times in one story. Are there other interpretations too?

Still feeling a bit confused, I nodded along to Hannelore's talking until it occurred to me that Wilfried was shooting us curious looks.

"Wilfried, is something wrong?" I asked.

"Nah. I was just thinking that Lady Hannelore sure reads into these stories."

Hannelore and I stared at Wilfried with blank expressions, unsure what to say.

A small grin crept onto his face. "You read a bunch of new stories one after another, Rozemyne, but you never really say much about any of them. Hearing someone go into so much detail is new to me."

I wouldn't be able to discuss any of those books even if I wanted to! I don't understand the descriptions enough to make any deep observations, and I can't empathize with the stories!

Sure, I understood on a surface level that blooming flowers represented a romance heating up and an autumn breeze a love being lost, but that didn't mean those stories resonated with me. I mean, think about it: the Goddesses of Autumn begin to dance, causing the protagonist's hair to stir—at which point our leading lady promptly bursts into tears. In my case, instead of sympathizing and crying with her, I would just blink in confusion. Only after a few moments of consideration would I think, "Ah, right, the autumn wind. Her romance failed, and the love is gone. But why so suddenly? Were there signs that I missed...?"

I would need to reread most sections over and over again to properly understand them, which made a lot of my books feel more like mysteries to be solved than heart-wrenching romance stories. And whenever such books were discussed at tea parties, I would spend my time listening to find out whether my interpretations were correct. I never actually reached the point of empathizing with the protagonist.

"I enjoy hearing other people's thoughts, especially when there are unique interpretations... but I always gravitate toward a new story over understanding one I've already read on a deeper level," I said, making sure to emphasize that I didn't have poor reading comprehension or anything. I was sure that reading a wider variety of content was a better way to adapt, anyway. I just needed more time to read.

It'll be like how I learned to pray. Sooner or later, I'll be able to empathize with love stories like it's nothing, right? Absolutely.

"You truly do love books, Lady Rozemyne. Oh, that reminds me—I read a bit of *The Story of Fernestine*, which you lent me the other

day..."

"You've started it already?" I asked. All my time spent going to and from laboratories meant that I had barely even touched my new books.

"Only the very beginning. Erm... is the protagonist perhaps based on you, Lady Rozemyne?"

"Hm? No, not at all. Fernestine is... someone else." I was being deliberately evasive—naturally, I couldn't reveal whom the character was actually based on. Still, I couldn't understand why anyone would confuse me with a gender-swapped Ferdinand.

Hannelore blinked repeatedly. "Is that so? But there are many similarities between the two of you—the golden eyes, the long blue hair that flutters in the wind, having beauty and intelligence from a young age... You were both taken in by an aub too."

Wow. If you focus on just those parts, then she really is like me!

It hadn't occurred to me when I read the book myself, since I already knew the person it was based on, but... this was bad. I didn't want people thinking that I was the basis for Elvira's ideal woman—well, man.

"I was not *taken in* by an aub; I was *adopted*," I hurriedly clarified. "I was baptized under my biological parents, and my adoptive family treats me well. Yes, my life was nothing like that of the true inspiration for this story, whose father's first wife refused to stand as their mother during their baptism and attempted to assassinate them so frequently that they could not relax even when eating." The last thing I wanted was for Florencia to be seen as the evil stepmother from the story.

"Rozemyne... do you mean to say this is a true story?" Lestilaut asked. "Is there someone in Ehrenfest who lived such a tragic and miserable life?" He shot a curious look at Wilfried, who shook his head in response and said that he knew no such person. Evidently, he was unaware that the story was based on Ferdinand suffering under Veronica.

"The story is not true in full," I explained. "Names, characters, businesses, and events are all the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental."

"Still... you know the person on whom the protagonist was based, Lady Rozemyne?" Hannelore asked. The doubt in her eyes had only grown stronger, and with both her and Lestilaut now scrutinizing me, I resigned myself to defeat.

"E-Er, well... Yes. But the author said that she mixed together several people for the character, so there is no single source of inspiration. One may simply think, 'Ah, is this part based on this

person?”

“Is it truly not about you, Lady Rozemyne?” Hannelore asked. I could tell that she was worrying about me, so I gave my most reassuring nod.

“I am not being treated so horribly. Isn’t that right, Wilfried?”

“Right. Her blood brother is one of her guard knights. The people around her wouldn’t let this kind of treatment occur.”

“I see...” Hannelore heaved a sigh of relief, and the concern on her face was replaced with a bright smile. At first, I was simply pleased that she understood... but then it occurred to me that I would need to repeat this same explanation over and over again in the Royal Academy, and the blood quickly drained from my face.

I can’t believe I never noticed the similarities between Fernestine and me! Mother, hurry and make the next volume! Nobody will confuse me with your character once we get to the part where she starts a romance with the prince!

Thus concluded our tea party with Dunkelfelger, which had resulted in so many new developments for me to report back to Ehrenfest.

Replies

I must have overexerted myself during our tea party, because I ended up bedridden with a fever for a short while afterward. The feeling was actually somewhat nostalgic, which just went to show how much my health had improved. Rihyarda seemed a little unsure about my mindset, though.

“It seems a little odd to celebrate your health while being stuck in bed.”

I decided to leave my report on the tea party to my scholars and instead chilled in bed, reading. The books I was borrowing from Anastasius, Solange, and Hortensia were all within my reach. Existence was bliss amid so many new, unread books.

“I guess this is the part with research about Schwartz and Weiss,” I mused aloud. “Oh, Ferdinand definitely hadn’t read this; his documents didn’t have a part with the Life element.”

As I recalled, the question of whether Life was needed to make Schwartz and Weiss had come up at the Interduchy Tournament, but nobody had managed to decide what manner of magic circles were inside them. This particular one did indeed use Life, but there was a blank space in the circle with a small note written beside it.

“This is the most I am able to solve. The rest I entrust to future generations.”

I noticed that some parts of the research overlapped with Ferdinand’s own findings; if we combined the two, then we would surely make a ton of progress. I needed to inform Ferdinand as soon as possible.

“Lieseleta, I’m going to my hidden room to write a letter and—”

“That can wait until your fever goes down.”

“But it’s urgent... It might lead to us learning how to make tools like Schwartz and Weiss,” I pleaded, desperately trying to appeal to her love of shumils.

Lieseleta froze and muttered, “Making shumils...” It appeared that my victory was assured, but then she sighed and gave me a smile.

“Please recuperate first. Whether you write your letter now or later will not change when Raimund receives it, nor will it allow you to begin researching how to make big shumils any sooner. Please return to bed.”

I was pushed back under the covers, leaving me with no choice

but to wait. And so, I went back to relaxing and reading—that is, until it occurred to me that Lieseleta was humming a joyful tune on the other side of my bed curtains. It was rare for her to show her emotions so openly during work; she must have been exceptionally pleased to hear that we were about to take a great step forward with our shumil research.

I'm glad that Lieseleta is so excited.

Even after my fever went down, I was forbidden from wandering around freely until my health was fully recovered. The only places I could go to were the dining hall and a particular seat in the common room situated near the fireplace. Personally, I much preferred the thought of staying in my room and reading my new books, but doing that would make it hard for me to stay in contact with my male retainers. To remedy this, I started poking my head into the common room after dinner each day, whereupon I would receive my retainers' most recent reports.

"Ehrenfest has sent a response," Roderick said on one such occasion, handing me a board. "Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte have seen it already."

I gave the message a read. "They've permitted all of our joint research projects, I see."

Research in the Royal Academy was left entirely to students, so it was usually approved unless there was some serious limiting factor at play. Our reply from Ehrenfest said that we were free to collaborate with each of the three greater duchies. We couldn't refuse Dunkelfelger, since a member of the royal family had suggested it, and working with Drewanchel would benefit us as well. I had already been planning to do our joint research project with Ahrensbach, so approval for that was a given.

Also written in our response from Ehrenfest was praise for our decision to give Wilfried's and Charlotte's retainers responsibility for the Drewanchel research. It seemed that, since we were doing three joint research projects at once, we would have otherwise been under suspicion of stealing the credit from our subordinates.

"Last of all, Ehrenfest has sent us this paper for research," Roderick said, indicating stacks of paper made from Illgner's feyplants.

The boxes in which the paper was being stored only had simple tags such as "nanseb" and "effon" on them, so the scholars weren't sure what the various kinds actually did. I started explaining the traits of each feyplant while handing the respective sheets to the research teams.

"Nanseb paper, also known as conjoining paper, is what we use

for the merchant slips distributed to other duchies. Before said slips are actually handed out, they are dyed the same color as the receiving duchy's capes—though I should mention that they have a tendency to fuse together to form one large piece. Effon paper is made from a feyplant called an effon, as its name suggests. I expect it has some property that produces sound.”

Ignaz and Marianne were writing down my every word, looking especially focused.

“If you have any questions then please ask them,” I continued. “I should also note that, in order to prevent any sensitive information from leaking to Drewanchel, I am opting to avoid Professor Gundolf's laboratory. I have already met with him and all that, so if you bring the research ingredients with you, then that should keep him adequately distracted.”

Once I was done with my explanation, Philine held out a different board. “Lady Rozemyne, this is the response regarding Prince Sigiswald and Lady Adolphine's Starbinding. For the sake of your relationship with the Sovereign Temple and your safety, they have suggested that you once again give a blessing from afar rather than officially acting as the High Bishop.”

“I agree that giving a blessing from the shadows is the ideal approach, but, to be honest, I don't think I can,” I replied. “In the past, my long-range blessings have come out on their own whenever my feelings run rampant; I've never given one consciously.”

I needed to give the first prince a larger blessing than I had given Anastasius and Eglantine, even though I didn't care about him at all. In fact, I barely even remembered his appearance. The best-case scenario was the prince getting a blessing that was noticeably less generous than that given to Adolphine standing beside him—and the worst-case but very plausible scenario was the prince getting nothing at all.

It would already be hard enough to get out a blessing and ensure that both Sigiswald and Adolphine received it equally; the thought of also needing to time it was terrifying. It was hard to believe that luck would carry me to success. I wanted to at least get some practice in first, but if people realized that there were blessings being sent left, right, and center, then they would no longer be seen as a special miracle of the gods.

I shook my head. “Please tell them that I must be present for the ceremony in order not to fail.” Taking the High Bishop's position would allow me to see Sigiswald and give the blessing directly. Besides, if people were to see the Sovereign High Bishop in front and the blessing appear from another direction entirely, then it would look like I was picking a fight with him. In my opinion, disrespecting him

in front of a huge crowd of nobles was a lot worse than giving the blessing personally at the royal family's request.

I penned a letter describing Ehrenfest's concerns, ending with a line that more or less meant: "Prince Anastasius will be responsible for managing our relations with the Sovereign Temple as the one who suggested this. Make sure Ehrenfest does not suffer any more than it has already." Then, I gave the letter to Brunhilde.

"Hand this to Professor Eglantine, if you would."

The matter of the Starbinding aside, I had also requested consultation on the Library Committee's work being changed to managing keys—though the most Ehrenfest could really do was obediently follow the orders of the royal family. I could tell that Sylvester was thinking: "I don't really understand the implications, so just roll with it."

"For now, it seems safe to keep avoiding the royal family outside of summons," I said.

"Furthermore, as per your request, the second volume of *The Story of Fernestine* is being printed without delay."

As it turned out, the script had been sent to the temple alongside the feystones needed for the Dedication Ritual. I sighed in relief. Once the copies arrived here at the Royal Academy, people would surely understand that Fernestine was nothing like me at all.

The next day, Muriella and Gretia came with their name-swearing stones. I accepted them in a separate room. This time, as I was taking the names of two girls, only my female guard knights and such were accompanying me.

"Leonore, will this do?" I asked. "If so, summon them both here."

"I see no problems to report, Lady Rozemyne. Philine, allow Muriella to enter first."

Philine brought in Muriella, whose name I promptly accepted. I channeled my mana into and transformed the stone all at once in an attempt to minimize the pain she felt, but she still appeared to suffer quite a bit.

"Are you well, Muriella?"

"I'm quite fine. The pain lingers, but it is nothing compared to the joy I feel. My resolve to give my name allowed me to attend a tea party with Dunkelfelger and hear Lady Hannelore's thoughts firsthand."

"Her thoughts...?"

"I agreed completely, absolutely, and positively with her thoughts on the love story—so much so that I could easily have spent an entire night in discussion with her. Aah, it fills me with such great happiness to know that someone enjoys the same book in the same way that I

do..." Muriella sighed sweetly, the sparkle in her green eyes growing brighter by the moment. Her breathing was heavy—in large part because she was still enduring the pain from being bound with my mana, but also doubtless because her heart was racing in excitement. The sight reminded me a lot more of Elvira than Hannelore.

Muriella seems really compatible with Mother—as you would expect, considering that she wanted to give Mother her name.

"Lady Rozemyne," Muriella continued, "I wish to pour my heart and soul into gathering love stories here at the Royal Academy and gifting them to you and Lady Elvira."

"Gathering stories is Philine's job," I said, putting a stopper on Muriella before she could recreate Elvira's rampage for love stories. "You must first learn about the printing and paper-making industries. After all, you will need to be able to work as Mother's subordinate when you return from the Royal Academy."

Muriella's eyelashes fluttered a few times in surprise, then her expression turned diligent, and she gave a firm nod. "Understood."

Yeah, there's no two ways about it—she'll be so much better as Mother's subordinate.

"Philine, teach Muriella about the printing and paper-making industries," I said. "In fact, while you are at it, teach her how to write reports as well. Once things have settled down, then you may teach her your methods for gathering stories and start working in tandem."

Now that Muriella was the apprentice scholar of an archduke candidate, she needed to be able to write reports that Ferdinand would approve of. Philine had already received more than two years of instruction from him and Hartmut, so she was more used to the process than Roderick, a newbie.

"Muriella, you should know that the hierarchy among my retainers is not based on status," I said. "Leonore, an archnoble, takes the lead here in the Royal Academy, but my guard knights in the castle are primarily overseen by Damuel, a laynoble. Similarly, although Philine is of a lower status than Roderick, I am entrusting her with your training due to her experience and precision. This is likely very different from what you have been taught to expect, but it is how I do things. You will need to grow used to it."

"Understood."

I motioned for Philine to leave with and start teaching Muriella, then had Lieseleta summon Gretia, whose name I also proceeded to accept. Gretia should have suffered just as much during the name-swearing process, but she bore it all with a simple grimace. By the time it was over, she had made nary a grunt.

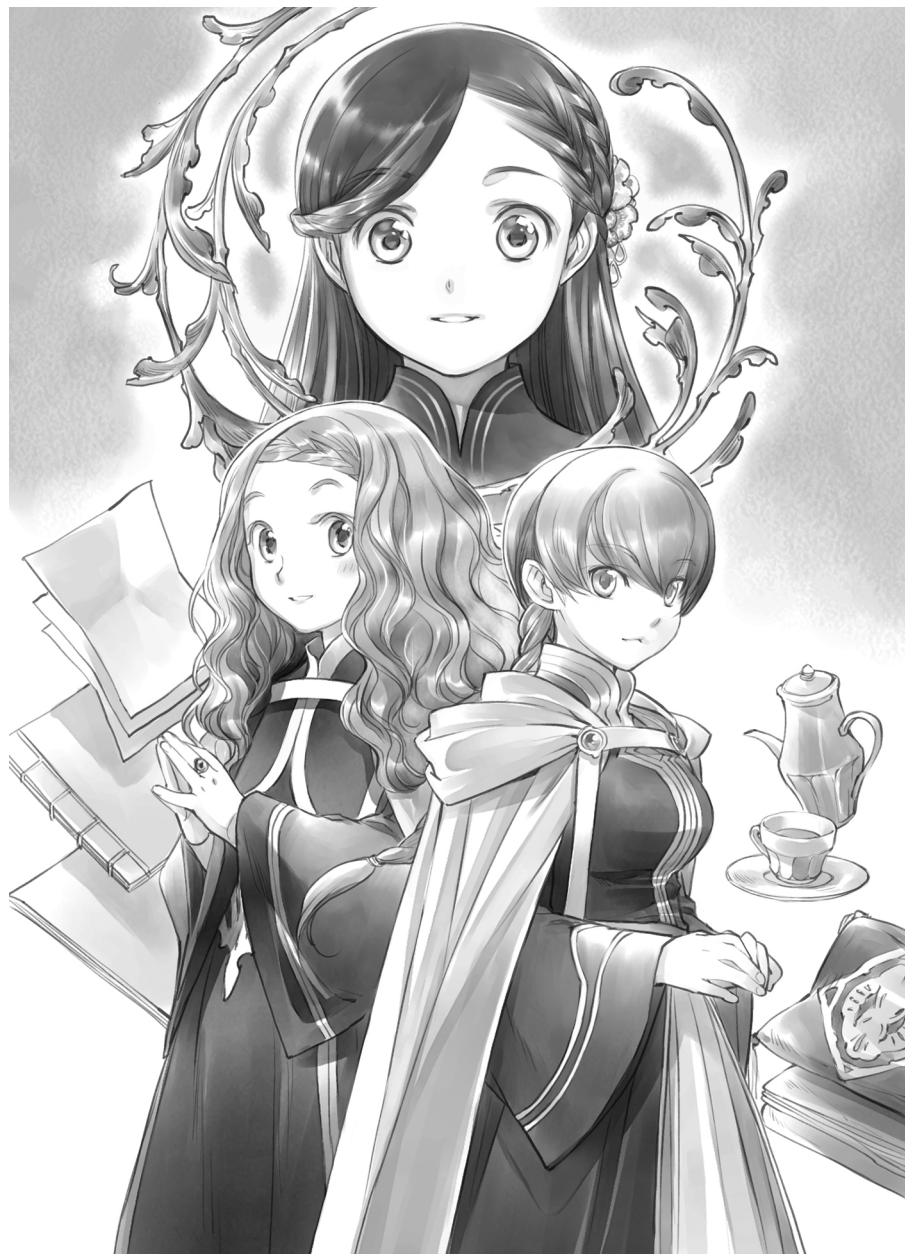
"Did that not hurt?" I asked. "Are you feeling okay?"

Gretia brushed her forelocks away from her blue-green eyes,

which I could now see were crinkled in a smile. “I thank you ever so much for your concern, but this much is nothing. I shall do my utmost to maintain a comfortable space for you who so graciously accepted my name.”

“I look forward to it. Lieseleta will instruct you in matters related to my chambers such that you can do just that.”

Brunhilde was busy with stuff related to the top-ranking duchies, so Lieseleta was going to be getting Gretia up to speed. She would teach her how to brew my preferred tea and many other intricate details for managing my room. Furthermore, although Gretia wouldn’t need to engage in any actual negotiations, she was expected to work in the shadows during our tea parties with top-ranking duchies. Lieseleta was going to explain that to her as well.



Lieseleta stepped forward and smiled. “Lady Rozemyne’s attendants are also expected to clean Professor Hirschur’s laboratory. I will teach you how, so listen well.”

“Professor Hirschur’s laboratory?” Gretia repeated, widening her eyes.

“A few exceptions aside, the laboratory is visited almost exclusively by mednobles. This is considered internal work as a result. Furthermore, as Lady Rozemyne will be busy researching Schwartz and Weiss from this point forward, she will need to visit much more regularly. It is an attendant’s duty to clean where their lady goes, so you must grow accustomed to this, Gretia.”

Gretia looked down a bit, then nodded.

Hm? Wasn’t I putting off researching Schwartz and Weiss because of our joint research projects?

It seemed that Lieseleta was planning to do everything in her power to assist Hirschur’s laboratory so that we could more easily carry out our research. Could you imagine a more heartening ally?

I was fully recovered, meaning I could finally return to Hirschur’s laboratory. I gave Raimund my third round of correspondence, this time regarding the Dunkelfelger tea party and the shumils’ magic circles, and in return received a reply from Ferdinand. Of course, Lieseleta performed various checks before it made it into my hands.

“This letter is fairly thick,” I observed.

Raimund nodded. “That is because there are two there—responses to your first two letters, apparently.”

As I continued to speak with Raimund, Gretia received two lessons from Lieseleta: an explanation about the letters, and a rundown of the poison-checking process, which she listened to alongside Laurenz. In the meantime, Judithe stuck with me as a guard.

“Thanks to your assistance, Lady Rozemyne, my sound-recording magic tool received a passing grade,” Raimund said.

“Please allow me to buy the schematics; I would very much like to make one myself. I do not have any money on me at the moment, but I will ask Rihyarda to bring some next time. Thus, do not sell them to anyone else. Consider this my reservation.”

Raimund laughed and said that nobody else would want them anyway—but I wouldn’t believe that for a second. People simply hadn’t realized what Raimund was worth yet.

“I wish to read Ferdinand’s responses in my room, so I shall be taking my leave for today,” I said. “Raimund, I will leave food for you and Professor Hirschur, so please do eat before starting on your research. Oh, and do not forget to deliver my new letter for

Ferdinand.”

“Understood.”

After getting my attendants to plate some food for Raimund, I returned to the dormitory with my retainers. I had written my actual correspondence to Ferdinand in invisible ink, and it was likely that he had done the same for his responses. Given that the hidden text would shine when being revealed, it was probably best not to read them in public.

Once in my room, I rushed to my hidden room with the letters in hand. “Yaaay! Responses! Responses!”

Taking an illuminating magic tool in hand allowed me to read the normal text, while the shining text was basically invisible. I started skimming the first letter and then blinked.

“Even the normal text is pretty scathing. Why, though...?”

I had fully expected Ferdinand to rake me over the coals in his hidden letter, but in his regular one too? It baffled me, since I really hadn’t done that much to warrant his frustrations. He had specifically criticized me for sticking my nose where it didn’t belong—an unfounded remark if ever there was one. My greatest offenses were worrying about his health and going out of my way to clean Hirschur’s laboratory, and neither one was somewhere my nose “did not belong.”

“And, hold on a second—he’s using language tricks to evade questions, isn’t he? This bit here: ‘Don’t worry. I am fine.’ That clearly indicates that he’s leading an unhealthy life, right?”

I pored over one critical sentence after another, then something miraculous caught my eye. He had described my efforts to pass each of my classes on the first day as “very good.”

“Woohoo! The patented Ferdinand ‘very good!’”

I turned off the light while humming to myself, and the shining letters became visible.

“He’s scolding me here as well. Let’s see... ‘How do you even cause so many problems in so short a time?’ I’m not trying to cause problems, but I’m sorry anyway.”

“Do not use ‘ascended to the greater heights’ to refer to what happened in your divine protections ritual,” he had written. *“In your case, that is actually probable.”*

As expected, Ferdinand hadn’t obtained his schtappe until after he performed the ritual, so he hadn’t struggled with losing control over his mana. In fact, in his case, his control had only improved. He went on to explain how he had solved his mana problems before obtaining a schtappe, but it was the same as what Sylvester had said.

“It is said that having too much mana delays one’s growth. In your case, you need only as much mana as your schtappe can wield, so perhaps you should start decompressing it and give your body some time to grow

until a resolution is found."

"I'm a bit healthier now thanks to the jureve, so thinning out my mana should make it easier for me to grow..."

As someone who agonized over being so much shorter than everyone else, I wanted to prioritize growing taller over having more mana. Most of the country was suffering from a mana shortage, so the Royal Academy largely encouraged students to prioritize mana compression and increasing their mana quantities. I had been feeling anxious about making my mana thinner, so it was super relieving to find out that my current quantity was good enough.

Then, as expected, Ferdinand said there was no need for me to tell Hirschur what was behind the shrine. *"Keep that information to yourself,"* he had written. Apparently, the magic circle for obtaining divine protections could also wait until my return to Ehrenfest.

Regarding our joint research on the ritual and our plans to repeat the process on adults in Ehrenfest, Ferdinand had said, *"You can earn protections even after coming of age. I received more after entering the temple."* He had completed the experiment already and included a list of the important discoveries he had made in the process.

Just how many experiments did you do in the temple, Ferdinand?!

However, he had only experimented on himself, so he hadn't learned from Justus or Eckhart that one could become omni-elemental through name-swearing as Roderick had. He also included a rare, honest statement from himself, which said, *"I would like to do research in Ehrenfest as well."* It was very casually written, but I could practically hear his mad-scientist soul crying out.

From there, Ferdinand very indirectly mentioned that he was a little relieved to hear that Hirschur and Sylvester had spoken and made up somewhat. He then said that we couldn't let our guards down even now that the purge was over, and that I needed to be especially careful after returning.

On the topic of our joint research project with Drewanchel, Ferdinand said that he was looking forward to seeing the published results. And as for our joint research with Ahrensbach, he said that he had already learned about it from Raimund. I could guess that he had yet to receive any letters from Fraularm.

As expected. It's either taking much longer to reach him or she's planning something...

Ferdinand requested more details about the joint research, then followed this up with a characteristically blunt remark. Hirschur had mentioned that Ferdinand was to blame for her decision not to take our problems seriously, and when I asked what he had done to warrant that, he had simply replied, "Not nearly as much as you."

"Hmph. That still means you caused a lot of problems too, my

dear Ferdie. Although... Wait, hold on a second. *'If you are both going to be presenting this as my disciples, then I must raise the severity of my grading scale.'* Just who are you in competition with?!"

It seemed that our joint research projects with three greater duchies had sparked Ferdinand's hatred of losing—especially when Raimund and I were marketing ourselves as his disciples. That meant our work was about to get a lot harder.

"I'm used to being thrown to the wolves like this, but I wonder how Raimund will cope. Well, he's Ferdinand's disciple too, so I'm sure he'll survive."

At the very, very end of the letter was one last note written in tiny letters: *"Oh, and do let people think the Geduldh song is a romantic one. That will be less problematic for me."*

Whew. It seems like he barely cares.

As I came to the end of the first letter, I realized that my eyes were stinging from squinting at the lights. I turned on the illuminating magic tool and put my hands over my face; I could still see the shining text on the back of my eyelids.

I wonder if Ferdinand went through this when reading my letters...

I could already picture his frustrated grimace as he squinted at the text. The very image brought a smile to my face as I reached for the second reply.

"This one seems fairly thick too. Let's see here..."

First, I read the parts written in normal ink. It seemed like a good idea to give my eyes some rest.

This was his response to my letter about making prototypes with Raimund in Hirschur's lab. I had made sure to very clearly write that the details were being sent through Fraularm—that way, whoever was checking the letters would know if she wasn't delivering them.

In response to that, Ferdinand had confirmed my suspicions: *"I have not yet received a letter from Fraularm, so I do not know the details of which you speak. Still, it is good that you are enjoying your research. Just take care not to bother those at the laboratory, as you are bringing so many retainers with you."* That gave me all the ammunition I needed to complain to Fraularm when I next gave her a report.

"And as for this part about not bothering anyone at the laboratory—I'm bringing them food and cleaning up their workspace. I'm *helping* them, if anything."

Hirschur's laboratory was drastically cleaner now thanks to the work of my attendants. Ferdinand would understand that if circumstances permitted him to visit during the Interduchy Tournament.

"Though I don't know whether there'll be enough leeway for that."

In my letter to Ferdinand, I had also mentioned the royal family's tea party for bookworms, though I'd deliberately stuck to innocent topics like sweets and the borrowed books. In regard to the former, I'd written: "Dunkelfelger is now making its own pound cakes with its specialty food, rohres. I am glad that other cultures are so readily adapting the recipe. It would be nice if more variations are made during my attendance at the Royal Academy."

His reply was *"I shall ask my head chef whether they can try putting Ahrensbach's local fruits in theirs, as Ahrensbach also seems to have purchased the recipe at the Archduke Conference."* If the head chef worked particularly hard, then maybe Ferdinand would come to like Ahrensbach food a little too.

As for the borrowed books, I'd written only the simplest, most surface-level description: "I borrowed books from the Sovereignty and the palace library. The one that Professor Solange lent me was from a closed archive and contains research on Schwartz and Weiss. I will inform you if we make any new discoveries. It is thick and well worth reading." The response I'd received from Ferdinand suggested that it had indeed caught his interest.

"It is excellent to hear that you have found solace outside of the library. As for that particular book, I am looking forward to hearing of any new discoveries you make. Your letter alone will surely give me a taste, however brief, of what it would be like to be doing the research myself."

Just how swamped with work is he? I get the feeling he's incredibly starved for research.

I personally didn't see an issue with him taking some time to enjoy his hobbies, but he was probably so busy trying to establish a power base while Detlinde was away at the Royal Academy that he didn't have the time.

My report on the bookworm tea party could be summarized as: "This time, I managed to endure the whole thing without collapsing. I've grown so much, wouldn't you say? It's all thanks to the potions you made for me, Ferdinand."

His response was generic. *"It is good to know that you are enjoying some degree of normalcy in the Royal Academy. I am similarly doing well."*

From there, Ferdinand described Letizia's education at length. He went into unusual detail about her curriculum and the amount she had progressed through it. It seemed that he was teaching her about as intensely as he had taught Wilfried and Charlotte, so I could gather that he was really putting her through the wringer. However, he also mentioned that she was "doing well" and "progressing further than he expected," among other things, so she must have been a very excellent student.

“He sure is praising Lady Letizia a lot. Gods, I wish he would direct some of that kindness at me. But, well... at least I got a ‘very good’ from him.”

Ferdinand even wrote about things I never would have expected, like which reward sweet Letizia enjoyed the most. *He must be on really good terms with her*, I thought as I turned off the light... but then I saw the shining letters.

Wowee. He must have written about her in so much detail so that he could cover up all this text.

Seeing all the extremely compact lines of text made me picture Ferdinand sweating bullets trying to come up with enough mundane chatter to disguise it all. I couldn’t help but chuckle to myself. He would probably give me a stern “Stop adding so much to my workload” as soon as he saw me at the Interduchy Tournament.

Though maybe he’ll refrain from saying even that much, since he won’t want other people to hear?

My hidden message had included a brief summary of my current predicament: “I will be serving as the High Bishop for a royal family Starbind Ceremony. It seems that Prince Anastasius and Lady Eglantine figured out that I was the one who blessed them on that fateful day, and my blessing apparently ignited a new conflict in the battle for the throne. Now, they want me to bless Prince Sigiswald as well.”

In response, Ferdinand had written: “*Naturally, there will be no way to refuse if you receive a formal request from the king.*” Unlike last time, this wasn’t an abrupt request being made the very day before, and there were a lot more people involved, so our hands were pretty much tied. It was a relief to hear that even Ferdinand thought we should accept.

Similarly, he responded to my question about what I should ask of the royal family on top of them getting the Sovereign Temple’s permission and allowing me to bring my guard knights.

“As you will be performing a ceremony in a location that you are unfamiliar with, make them allow you to bring Hartmut as support. Furthermore, as the royal family will be laying the groundwork with the temple and pushing through your guard knights, ensure that you do not fall ill at a critical time.”

It was certainly true that my constitution was the biggest concern here; I had to make absolutely sure that I wouldn’t end up needing to cancel on the day of. Worst-case scenario, I would have to chug a bucket of potions and force myself up on stage anyway. It seemed wise to prepare even the ultra-nasty variety.

The part I’d added about wanting to see Ferdinand get married earned me this reply: “*You should not bless my Starbind Ceremony,*

especially as your blessings are so greatly dependent on your feelings. The last thing we want is for me to receive a larger blessing than the prince. Do not forget why I was urged to leave Ehrenfest in the first place.”

Considering the suspicions that he was targeting the throne as a seed of Adalgisa, he was right—my blessing favoring him would cause huge problems.

Still, it'll be hard not to bless him...

I pursed my lips and continued reading. As the topic changed from the Starbinding to the library, I recalled my own account of the whole key situation: “An archnoble librarian from the Sovereignty has taken ownership of Schwartz and Weiss. Now, the Library Committee will serve a new purpose: helping with the management of three keys, each of which requires a separate owner, used to unlock a particular archive. Once the librarian has inspected the inside, I’m allowed to read whatever books it contains.”

The response that Ferdinand gave was unexpected, to say the least. *“You say ‘once the librarian has inspected the inside,’ but my understanding is that only those registered as royalty, archduke candidates registered as mana suppliers for foundational magics, and the library’s magic tools can enter the archive. As I recall, the archive was managed not by the librarians, but by the tools themselves, with the librarians only managing the keys.”*

It seemed that during a period when Ferdinand was visiting the library—often to search for research documents for Hirschur—he had mumbled something about a particular document. That passing remark had led to Schwartz and Weiss informing him of the archive.

“That said, I find that the royal family’s complete ignorance of so many subjects is unnatural. Someone may be limiting access to information or otherwise hiding the existence of documents from them. The archive that requires three keys is a storage space for old documents and intelligence preserved through magic tools, filled with knowledge that the present and future kings need to know. It is an archive not for you, but for archdukes and the royal family.”

It seemed that the archive stored textbooks on previous archduke candidate courses and reference documents for old rituals, including documents relating to Haldenzel’s ceremony. Ferdinand had wanted to access it during last year’s Archduke Conference, but Schwartz and Weiss had turned him and Sylvester down because there was no librarian.

“Eheheh. In other words, since I’m an archduke candidate who’s performing Mana Replenishment—and who’s been entrusted with one of the three keys—I can go inside? Yay!”

But just as I was starting to celebrate, I read on: *“If the royal family has lost knowledge on these matters, then it would be best for them to see it*

immediately. You are not to approach the archive yourself, however. Doing that will only cause problems."

Noooooo!

I cradled my head in my hands. His response hadn't come as much of a surprise, to be honest, but I still couldn't contain my envy.

Ferdinand got to read the archive's documents when he was a student, so why can't I?! I want to read new books too!

Outside of responding to my questions, Ferdinand also told me about the current state of Ahrensbach. Georgine's influence stretched further than he'd thought, and the chalices that the former High Bishop had brought to the Dedication Ritual had apparently belonged to Old Werkestock. Many citizens resented Ehrenfest for its lack of support, and there was a surprisingly large number of people who didn't know that Letizia was guaranteed to become the next archduchess as per a royal decree. It was possible that even Detlinde herself wasn't aware that she was only an interim aub.

Ferdinand concluded that segment by saying that I should pass all of this intelligence on to Sylvester. It really seemed to me, though, that his position as Letizia's teacher was a very dangerous one.

"Furthermore, an emissary from Lanzenave arrived and probed about a princess being delivered. Aub Ahrensbach will need to present the issue to the king at the next Archduke Conference. Should he agree, then a new princess will be sent to the Adalgisa villa."

If such a fate came to pass, then Ferdinand would have no choice but to personally send a princess to the Adalgisa villa, even knowing it would result in more people being born in his position. It was sure to be a fairly painful task for him.

"Why does Ahrensbach have to be Lanzenave's point of contact? Why couldn't Ferdinand have married into any other duchy?"

After finishing my letters from Ferdinand, I wrote a report to Sylvester and then exited my hidden room. "Muriella, please have this sent to Aub Ehrenfest," I said. "Rihyarda, there is something I must tell the royal family, but I do not know how to go about it..."

I explained what I had learned about the archive, then asked whether I should inform Hildebrand or Eglantine. Hildebrand was the royal family's representative at the Royal Academy, but Eglantine would probably get the information to Anastasius or Sigiswald sooner.

"I would suggest sending ordonnances to Prince Hildebrand, Professor Eglantine, *and* the library, informing them that you have urgent news to explain to all of them at once. A setting will surely be arranged for you," Rihyarda replied. Apparently, we could just give that responsibility to the Sovereignty.

And so, I started sending out the ordonnances.

"It seems that archnoble librarians can do no more than open the

archive,” I said to the birds. “Only a select number of archduke candidates, a member of the royal family, and Schwartz and Weiss can enter. Inside are documents that the royal family would benefit from reading.”

“I should like to hear the details. Come to my villa three days from now at third bell,” came my first response. It was from Anastasius, which was a little peculiar considering that the ordonnanz had been for Eglantine. I crossed my arms, feeling suspicious, while my retainers busily got to work.

“Oh my. Three days is more than enough time,” Brunhilde said. “I shall speak to the chefs about what foods to prepare.” She then turned on her heel and left the room.

In contrast, Gretia could only croak out, “A summons from the royal family...?” She was actually trembling. It just went to show what a difference experience made.

“Lady Rozemyne, will you need anything other than a pen and paper when visiting the villa?” Philine asked, taking a momentary break from her transcribing work.

“Not this time,” I replied. “I sense that I am about to become very busy, so let us focus on transcribing our books as soon as possible.”

Muriella, who had been transcribing another book, heaved a tired sigh. “Your scholars have more work than I expected, Lady Rozemyne. I am a little surprised.” She had assumed that she would have more time to read at her own leisure—and, therefore, more time to enjoy Elvira’s love stories. It hadn’t even crossed her mind that she might be tasked with going through complicated books.

Philine placed a hand on her cheek, looking a little surprised herself. “Well, once Lady Rozemyne returns to the temple, she is going to be even busier. On top of sorting through gathered stories and information, transcribing books, and accompanying her to tea parties, we will need to take on temple work and duties related to the printing and paper-making industries.” She gave a bright smile. “Ah, but it is all well worth doing.”

Muriella responded with her own smile, which was noticeably stiffer than Philine’s. Thinking about it like that, my scholars certainly carried a much heavier burden than those serving Wilfried or Charlotte.

“Muriella, as you intend to give your name to my mother upon graduating, I do not mind if you stick to only doing Royal Academy work,” I said.

“That will not be necessary,” Muriella replied, albeit after a slight pause. “I am your retainer as well.” Then, after pumping herself up, she confidently dipped her pen back into the ink she was using.

I could feel a pleasant warmth spread through my chest as I

watched my retainers work. My next course of action was to make my plans for later. I didn't care much about advising the royal family, especially as I didn't intend to get too involved with them, but I *did* care about Ferdinand's reputation and strengthening his position through joint research.

I should reply to Professor Rauffen first, then, I guess.

He had sent me an invitation to the knight dormitory after I requested an opportunity to ask the apprentice knights about research stuff. I would need to reply to that as well.

But when, I wonder? Preparations will take time, won't they?

I would need to create a questionnaire in advance so that all of my queries were in order. There would need to be an answer column as well, and we'd need several copies to distribute. We didn't have anything as convenient as a copy machine, though, so my apprentice scholars would need to write them all out by hand.

Mm... Maybe this would be a good opportunity for them to learn how to make questionnaires.

My hard work began from there, and it continued all the way up until the day Anastasius had scheduled for our meeting.

Epilogue

In the common room of the Dunkelfelger Dormitory, Lestilaut monopolized a desk within full view of the hall and used the papers before him to sketch out draft illustrations for *A Ditter Story*. Ideally, he would have been in his room where he could focus, but archduke candidates had a duty to oversee the other students.

For the past few days, many of the dormitory's students had been fairly rambunctious due to *A Ditter Story* and the Dunkelfelger history book. Lestilaut could hardly tell them to stop reading the books, though, for he knew they would soon be future trends.

"As attendants, it is our duty to ensure that our interactions with other duchies progress smoothly, so we must read the books before socializing season begins."

"No, we scholars should read them first. We deal with the borrowing and lending, after all."

"Scholars merely check them for threats before passing them on. You have no need to know their contents."

The argument between the students was growing louder. Lestilaut looked up from his sketches just in time to see some of the apprentice knights try to wedge themselves between the apprentice scholars and attendants vying for priority access to the books.

"Given our involvement in the joint research project, it is necessary that those of us with multiple divine protections read it first."

"Oh, be quiet! Go play ditter or something!"

Hmph. I need not speak on this matter.

The books they were fighting over were those Lestilaut had borrowed during the tea party with Ehrenfest. He could not risk damaging them, so he had initially arbitrated these debates. He was a short-tempered young man, however, so he had soon grown irritated by the daily, unchanging arguments. In the end, he had declared that he would hold on to the books until whoever won their dispute came to borrow them—and that he would observe them until they finished reading. His main concern was ensuring that no harm came to the borrowed books.

"Is Hannelore not back yet?" Lestilaut asked his nearby retainers. He was currently stuck serving as an overseer, but it would not be long before his little sister finished her classes and returned to the

common room. That would allow him to return to his own room and draw there.

Unfortunately for Lestilaut, his retainers responded only with a dismissive “Not yet, it seems.”

In an attempt to vent his building irritation, Lestilaut pointed his pen at those arguing and said, “Do you all not find this shameful? We have apprentice knights who would rather read than play *ditter*.”

“It may be a peculiar sight, but the bliss that one feels when reading *A Ditter Story* is truly remarkable,” replied Kenntrips, a fourth-year apprentice scholar. He looked at the papers on which Lestilaut was drawing and gave a wry smile. “Furthermore, hearing that the story is gripping enough for you to have offered to provide illustrations has greatly increased the students’ interest. One could say that you brought this upon yourself.”

Those serving Dunkelfelger’s archduke candidates had already read the books to ensure that their tea parties with Ehrenfest went as smoothly as possible. This war in the common room was no sweat off their backs.

“*A Ditter Story* really makes one want to play treasure-stealing *ditter*,” said Rasantark, an apprentice knight. “It fills one with fire during training. Perhaps we could interpret this as an invitation from Ehrenfest to play *ditter*?” He was eagerly leaning forward, his chestnut eyes sparkling at the very idea. Although he would normally prioritize training over books any day of the week, even he had devoured the new story.

“Calm down, Rasantark,” Kenntrips chided. “Ehrenfest has only asked us to confirm that none of the descriptions are incorrect. They have not challenged us to *ditter*.”

Rasantark deflated a little, his eyes downcast, looking like a scolded dog. He was in the same year as Hannelore, but even Lestilaut thought he was still immature in many regards. At times like this, it was hard not to want to muss his bright-orange hair.

“Don’t feel so down, Rasantark,” Lestilaut said. “I can understand your interest. This is the first time I’ve read of someone aiming for victory with the help of apprentice scholars. There has not been a story like this before.”

He looked down at his sketches so far. No modern students had experienced treasure-stealing *ditter*; instead, current classes were based entirely on the speed version, so knights saw no reason to seek the assistance of scholars or attendants. They did everything themselves. Dunkelfelger was something of a special case with its many scholars and attendants of the sword, who spoke about *ditter* more than the scholars and attendants of other duchies, but even then, Lestilaut struggled to imagine the three groups working together. In

that sense, *A Ditter Story* imbued its readers with profound admiration for the treasure-stealing ditter that had been commonplace for the knights of the past. Or, at the very least, it had imbued Lestilaut with such admiration.

“Indeed, while there are historical stories about knights, there are few describing the modern Royal Academy,” Kenntrips noted. “There are only Ehrenfest’s *Royal Academy Love Stories* and perhaps personal research diaries.”

Lestilaut nodded. Highly important events were often turned into books, but the same certainly couldn’t be said for regular everyday occurrences. In his opinion, Ehrenfest had managed it precisely by making their books so thin and affordable.

“It’s unfortunate that *A Ditter Story* didn’t already have illustrations,” Kenntrips mused. “Lord Lestilaut, you long to see what Ehrenfest’s artist would have drawn as well, do you not?”

The illustrations in Ehrenfest’s previous books had all been splendid, so Lestilaut had indeed been looking forward to more of the same. It was a true shame.

“I was told that the artist is a commoner,” Lestilaut said. “That is why she could not illustrate a story about ditter.”

“And also why the task has fallen to you, Lord Lestilaut?” Rasantark asked, flipping through the papers that Kenntrips had organized with a look of unrestrained excitement. On the pages were illustrations of several scenes that Lestilaut had found the most impactful.

“Yes. Look forward to seeing my finished work.” He intended to draw every scene that had caught his interest, carefully select the best five among them, and then show those to Rozemyne. Then she would say, “Oh, I wish for these illustrations to be in the books more than anything!”

“Well, I’m most looking forward to the next book in the series! The first one ended at such a gripping moment, so I’m terribly curious for what comes next. I need to find the author, Lord Shubort, and ask him to start writing as soon as possible!” Rasantark declared, clenching a fist in determination.

Lestilaut gave him a look of exasperation. “He is an Ehrenfest noble, no? One who wrote about treasure-stealing ditter, at that. It is unlikely he is a student, and you will surely struggle to find an adult from another duchy.”

“Could you not ask Ehrenfest to have him brought to the Archduke Conference?”

“I could, but you are underage and would not be able to meet him. I, myself, am going to be attending from next year onward—though that matters little for you.”

Lestilaut was in his final year at the Academy, meaning he could participate in the next Archduke Conference, but Rasantark was still a third-year. The other retainers laughed as he put his head in his hands and groaned.

“I understand how you feel,” Kenntrips said consolingly. “Were I able to meet this Lord Shubort, then I would tell him to keep writing works like *A Ditter Story*. It is so unlike other stories that I find it quite gripping.”

Lestilaut crossed his arms. Now that Kenntrips mentioned it, *A Ditter Story* truly was unique, even compared to previous Ehrenfest books. *Knight Stories* had contained legends and religious tales, not accounts of the present day. And whether they placed an emphasis on battles or on the more romantic aspects that girls tended to prefer, there were only one or two truly new stories; the rest were already common knowledge. The books were by no means bad, but Lestilaut felt that their true value was in their illustrations.

Royal Academy Love Stories featured tales from the present day. Perhaps this, coupled with the familiar backdrop, was the reason that Hannelore and so many other girls had become completely absorbed in them and would discuss their thoughts and hopes for a sequel during tea parties. Lestilaut found these ravings to be no more interesting than the lengthy rambles of gossip-loving women. To him, the stories were uninteresting channels through which the illustrations could thrive.

In contrast to these fanciful tales, the Dunkelfelger history book had been wonderful indeed. The original text found in the duchy’s castle was exceedingly rare—it had never been lent to anyone in our duchy, and its text was written in an archaic language that almost nobody could read. It had thus become common practice for the history within to be passed down orally, which had in turn led to the flow and the details changing according to the speaker.

Rozemyne’s translation, however, was written in modern language. It was easy to understand and followed the precise flow of the original text, without the inclusion or removal of particular events or details. The books themselves were also much thinner and easier to read than the original, owing to the text having been spread across several volumes.

“We must make similar history books in Dunkelfelger as well...” Lestilaut mused. He was unsure whether it was because the laynobles of their duchy had previously lacked opportunities to read or because the other students merely hadn’t realized that their history was splendid enough for another duchy to want to publish it, but those who read the book all seemed to take a lot more pride in their heritage after the fact.

“That would be ideal, if possible,” Kenntrips remarked. “I must say, I find the technology used to duplicate books quite impressive indeed. It seems far superior to transcribing. If we had it ourselves, then there would be no need for that squabbling in the common room.” He gestured to the students still passionately fighting over who would get to read the books first.

Lestilaut had been told that Ehrenfest was attempting to spread a new technology that would allow for the production of multiple copies of the same book. There was no doubting its existence as he, Clarissa, and the royal family had all received identical copies of *A Ditter Story* at the same time.

“It seems that Clarissa is the subject of much envy for having already secured an engagement to one of Lady Rozemyne’s retainers,” Kenntrips said.

Lestilaut found Clarissa’s rampaging tendencies bothersome, to say the least, and the last thing he wanted was for people to assume that her actions were normal in Dunkelfelger. Still, Rozemyne had successfully managed to calm her down during their tea party, and it appeared that Clarissa’s potential as a future retainer was fully understood. After all, she had received a copy of *A Ditter Story* from one of Rozemyne’s retainers.

“First Mother, now Clarissa...” Lestilaut muttered. “I find the sharp noses and general acumen of our duchy’s women to be genuinely terrifying.”

After seeing Rozemyne play ditter in her first year at the Royal Academy, Clarissa had immediately resolved to serve her and then taken all the necessary steps to ensure it came to be. And in a similar vein, Lestilaut’s mother, Sieglinde, had started paying close attention to Rozemyne the moment she saw the book that Hannelore had borrowed from her at the end of their first year. At that time, Lestilaut had seen her as nothing more than an archduke candidate who was somewhat audacious for someone from an almost bottom-ranking middle duchy.

“You should be terrified not of them, but of Lady Rozemyne,” Kenntrips said. “It seems that she—not Lord Wilfried, the future archduke—has the ultimate authority over whose illustrations are put in Ehrenfest’s books.”

Lestilaut thought back to when Wilfried and Rozemyne had been discussing the illustrations. Indeed, it was Rozemyne who had taken the lead.

Which reminds me—according to Father, Rozemyne’s thoughts were also prioritized during that discussion about publishing rights that was decided through a game of ditter.

Rozemyne had been the one to seek publishing rights in the first

place, and all eighteen of the large golds that were spent on the modern translation had apparently come from her pocket. Lestilaut had heard that Rozemyne also negotiated with Aub Dunkelfelger herself, with Aub Ehrenfest only stepping in to grant his permission.

Is this truly a duchy industry, or is Ehrenfest just using Rozemyne's personal interests for its own benefit?

Lestilaut frowned and crossed his arms as several facts came together in his mind to form a troubling conclusion. The new cooking methods, sweet recipes, hairpins, books... It was said that all of Ehrenfest's new trends had started with Rozemyne, but had she truly sought to spread them? Even if not, as an adopted daughter, she would not have been able to refuse.

And so Lestilaut's thoughts took a dark turn, in part due to *The Story of Fernestine*. The tale of an unfortunate archduke candidate suffering abuse for not being the first wife's true daughter certainly brought Rozemyne to mind. Furthermore, it was odd that Rozemyne, an adopted daughter, knew whom the story was based on while Wilfried remained in the dark.

"Apologies for the wait, Brother," came Hannelore's voice. "I can take your place now."

"You took your time."

Lestilaut had not been able to leave his post as overseer even after running out of paper for his sketches. He had stressed when Hannelore was leaving that she was to hurry back, so he couldn't mask his displeasure about her painfully slow return.

Hannelore flinched upon sensing her brother's frustration—a reaction that caused Rasantark to put a cautioning hand on Lestilaut's shoulder and Kenntrips to murmur, "Please do not take out your anger on Lady Hannelore" from behind him. Although they were younger than Lestilaut, they were his cousins, so they did not hesitate to reprimand him.

"Apologies," Lestilaut said. "My eagerness to draw has me feeling a little anxious."

"Is this about your illustration of Lady Rozemyne whirling?" Hannelore asked.

"Yes. My attendants will inform you of the status of the books and the order in which they are being lent out."

After entrusting an attendant with bringing Hannelore up to date, Lestilaut brought his other retainers back to his room in a hurry. He had his scholar, Kenntrips, prepare the paints he needed, then took his brush in hand. In the common room, Lestilaut would draw illustrations for *A Ditter Story* to pass the time... but in his room, where he could properly focus, he would draw Rozemyne whirling.

Lestilaut shut his eyes and took a deep breath. That alone was

enough for a perfect recreation of the moment to arise in his mind—the moment when his full attention, which had previously been on Hannelore, was unconsciously drawn to Rozemyne amid the group of a dozen or so whirlers. Let it be known that he was far from the only one to become so enraptured—Rozemyne’s whirling had been so dominant and overwhelming that every spectator in the room had ended up watching her.

The overwhelming focus in Rozemyne’s golden eyes had made it clear to all that she was in complete control from her head to her fingertips to her toes. In truth, Lestilaut could not quite put his finger on what about her had stolen his attention. And then, she had started to shine—or more precisely, a faint light akin to saturated mana had started to envelop her. Lestilaut had strained his eyes, thinking it was a mere illusion, but then the feystones she was wearing had also begun to light up one after another.

First was her feystone ring, which drew blue arcs as her fingers gracefully sliced through the air. Then the feystone on her bracelet came to life, seeming to dye her whirling outfit a plethora of radiant and ever-changing colors. Her necklace followed soon after, then finally her hair ornaments. All the while, Rozemyne continued to spin without so much as the slightest falter, streaks of the most dazzling light following her every move.

Lestilaut had been too awestruck to manage even a quiet gasp—he could only stare at the sight before him. At that moment, but one name could adequately describe the woman dancing for them: the Saint of Ehrenfest. The spectacle had been so divine that Lestilaut felt he was seeing a proper whirl offered to the gods for the very first time.

It was then that Lestilaut was struck with his all-consuming urge to draw Rozemyne. His pen had danced across the page as soon as he returned to his dormitory, yet he still hadn’t finished the illustration.

“Is it done?” Rasantark asked the instant he saw Lestilaut set down his brush. He and the other guard knights had spent days watching him paint in his room when they would have much rather been training and playing ditter. Lestilaut understood that he was boring them but had no intention of compromising his painting for their sake.

“No, the lighting needs work. It is far from done.”

“I have never seen you put so much effort into an illustration before... Are you seeking Lady Rozemyne as a first wife, perhaps?” Kenntrips narrowed his gray eyes in concern. “Have you—gods forbid—fallen in love with her...?”

Lestilaut scoffed. “What a foolish notion. How can anyone fall for a child who has not even developed mana sensing?”

“True, but...” Kenntrips looked at the painting of Rozemyne, clearly not satisfied with the answer he had received.

“I have *not* fallen in love with her,” Lestilaut reiterated, having deduced what Kenntrips wanted to say. “My only intention is to capture the beauty and serenity I witnessed on that day. Until then, the tireless movement of my hands and the pounding of my heart will not stop. That is all.”

Lestilaut’s retainers all exchanged glances.

Kenntrips fell into thought for a bit, then sighed and scratched at his light-green hair. “Putting aside any discussion of romantic inclinations, might I suggest courting her regardless? Such a union would clearly bring tremendous wealth to our duchy. Everyone would welcome Lady Rozemyne as your first wife.”

“What are you even saying? Rozemyne is already engaged,” Lestilaut replied, recalling how his mother had bemoaned the engagement. Rozemyne wasn’t even available to be taken as a first wife.

“But at this rate, she will soon be stolen by the royal family, will she not? It will make no difference whether they take her or we do. If you court her and then perform bride-taking dinner, then the royal family will not be able to interject.”

The king had approved Rozemyne’s current engagement, but Kenntrips was right that the royal family could still take her at any moment. Rozemyne had formed the hypothesis that performing religious ceremonies increased the number of divine protections one received and was aiming to publish her findings at this year’s Interduchy Tournament. Considering that her familiarity with religious ceremonies was beyond compare, she likely had the most protections herself, even among adult nobles. It seemed obvious that the royal family would want her for themselves and that it was only a matter of time before the king dissolved her union with Wilfried.

Nothing good will come from her announcing how to obtain more divine protections at the Interduchy Tournament.

“The first prince is already married to one woman, and it has been decided that he will make Adolphine of the greater duchy Drewanchel his first wife,” Lestilaut mused. “If the royal family were to take Rozemyne, then she would perhaps become his third wife...”

The third wife of a royal family member was kept from the public eye under all but the most severe circumstances—but at the same time, they held enough influence that they were at risk of being harmed by those who feared a shift in the internal power balance of the royal family. Given that Rozemyne’s influence grew with each new year at the Royal Academy, if she were to be sought after as the third wife of a prince, then she would need to live a life fraught with

danger.

“Is there any chance she would be taken as the second prince’s second wife?” Kenntrips asked.

“Assuming that Prince Anastasius truly does not seek the throne, then he would have no reason to take such action and invite suspicion upon himself. It is hard to imagine a prince who abandoned the kingship to obtain Lady Eglantine would take such a risk.”

Anastasius prioritized Eglantine over everything—over the throne, and over his relationship with his elder brother. If a situation came about where he would need to sacrifice Rozemyne for Eglantine’s sake, he would do so without a moment’s hesitation.

“Then we will only need to be on guard against the first prince,” Kenntrips said. “But... do you intend to court her, Lord Lestilaut? If not, then attempting bride-taking will prove a little more difficult. It would turn into bride-*stealing*.” It was clear from the look in his eyes that he thought such a move would be impossible.

Lestilaut glared at his cheeky, ever-too-realistic apprentice scholar. Frustratingly enough, Lestilaut’s graduation was right around the corner, meaning he only had this one year to get closer to Rozemyne—and if one reflected on his words and deeds up to this point, he had quite a way to go. To make matters worse, there was the looming threat that she would be stolen by the royal family depending on the quality of their joint research. It would be one thing for Ehrenfest to refuse such a request from Dunkelfelger, but turning down the royal family was unthinkable.

In short, there was an overwhelming lack of time. Lestilaut knew that better than anyone.

“If we extrapolate from how she is being treated in Ehrenfest, then there is some hope of victory here,” Lestilaut said. His head had cooled now that the discussion about “love” and “romance” had been set aside. Now, what mattered was proving that it was more beneficial for Rozemyne to marry into Dunkelfelger than remain the archduke’s slave in Ehrenfest or be in constant danger among the royal family. “Seek opportunities. Gather intelligence. However, do not speak a word of this to Hannelore.”

This last instruction caused Lestilaut’s retainers to stare at him in surprise; it was because of Hannelore’s great efforts that Dunkelfelger had so many avenues to socialize with Ehrenfest. At the very least, none of the credit rightfully belonged to Lestilaut, who had continually belittled Rozemyne as a fake saint. If not for his younger sister, even inviting her to a tea party would have been a struggle.

“Should you not form an alliance with Lady Hannelore, as she has the closest relationship with Lady Rozemyne?”

“No. Involving her is bound to cause any number of tedious

problems.”

Hannelore held no ill intentions, but there was no denying that her timing was tragically unfortunate. Lestilaut had already endured countless experiences where involving his younger sister had made him struggle more than was necessary. Thankfully, as their cousins, Kenntrips and Rasantark understood exactly what he meant.

And so everyone agreed to go forward without informing Hannelore.

Rozemyne’s value was only going to increase come the Interduchy Tournament. She was engaged in joint research projects with several duchies, had a tremendous number of divine protections, and was responsible for more and more new trends. This was Lestilaut’s only chance to beat out the royal family and the other duchies for her.

“Other duchies may shy away from Rozemyne’s current engagement, but we must get her into Dunkelfelger before the royal family discovers her true value and claims her for themselves,” Lestilaut declared.

“Yes, my lord!”

Fantasy versus Reality

“Are you really reading one of those books again, Lady Muriella?” Lord Barthold asked. He took me by the shoulders and shook me, dragging me from the world of *Royal Academy Love Stories* and back into the Ehrenfest common room.

I furrowed my brow. All I wanted was to indulge in the sweet world of fantasy, but the past few days had been filled with nothing but people interrupting my reading. Books provided a fantastic insight into worlds I had previously known nothing about. It was only through these heart-throbbing stories that I could avert my eyes from the realities I wished not to see and rest my soul. The last thing I wanted was to be pulled from my distraction.

But, sadly, ignoring him will only make things worse.

Lord Barthold was an apprentice mednoble of the former Veronica faction. Our mothers were on good terms, so he was considered a potential marriage candidate for me. However, he always wanted to be the center of any group. He was also very controlling and would always try to get me to obey his demands, so I wasn't very fond of him.

“How about considering the future instead of reading?” Lord Barthold asked.

Having little choice but to acknowledge him, I gazed up from my book and attempted to hide my displeasure with a smile. “Oh, but I *am* considering the future. I have decided to give my name to Lady Rozemyne.”

“Why her? You're an apprentice scholar; go with Lord Wilfried instead.”

Upon being told that he would need to give his name to avoid being punished alongside his family, Lord Barthold, as a profound worshipper of Lady Veronica, had said that he would give his to Lord Wilfried. He could not trust the aub who had imprisoned his own mother, and, in his own words, no other archduke candidate would understand the pain he felt over losing his parents.

Though I doubt Lord Wilfried will continue respecting Lady Veronica forever, especially when she committed crimes that not even the aub could cover and has been imprisoned for many years now.

I had already experienced how easily the hearts of people could change with their environment, so my faith in familial “love” was

nowhere to be seen. The characters in my fictional stories were one thing, but one could not trust the hearts of real people.

“I appreciate the concern, Lord Barthold, but I wish to serve Lady Rozemyne, the creator of these wonderful books,” I replied. In truth, I would have rather given my name to Lady Elvira, but I needed to swear my loyalty to a member of the archducal family to avoid punishment. Lady Rozemyne had said that she would ask the aub about realizing my wish, but I was far from hopeful that anything would come of it.

Lord Barthold harrumphed. “I can’t believe you’re having fun reading books when your parents might be executed soon.”

“It is precisely because my circumstances are so painful that I would rather avoid reality,” I said with a smile, then returned my attention to the book in my hands; I did not feel like speaking to Lord Barthold any further. He continued to rattle on about something or other, but I had already escaped back into another world—one where there were only wonderful men, and aggressive people like Lord Barthold were nowhere to be found.

The archducal couple were visiting the dormitory, and five students had been summoned to a meeting room. There were Matthias, Laurenz, Barthold, Cassandra, and me. That alone told us everything. Our parents had been punished, and we would need to give our names to escape a similar fate.

Lady Rozemyne said that the blame for a crime should stay with those who committed it and not extend to their families, but we knew better than anyone how hard that would be to put into practice. After all, our faction had aided Lady Veronica as she forged vile acts and punished Leisegang nobles for them en masse.

The air in the meeting room was tense, and the archducal couple’s guard knights were on high alert, their eyes narrowed as they scrutinized our every move. The other nobles would surely look at us the same way if we were to return to Ehrenfest.

Ah. I can feel myself getting depressed already.

Aub Ehrenfest explained the immense danger of those who had given their names to the first wife of another duchy. He then noted that, while a group centered around Giebe Gerlach had been planning something together, he had sent the Knight’s Order in a hurry to capture them.

“Matthias, it is thanks to you that we were able to capture the traitors within Ehrenfest without being harmed,” he continued. “You have my gratitude. Under normal circumstances, every one of you would be considered guilty by association and executed. However, if you give your names to the archducal family and swear that you will

remain loyal, then I intend to spare your lives. I expect you have already heard the same from the archduke candidates, but what do you say?"

Indeed, we had already discussed this, so we replied that we would give our names to the archducal family without any particular fuss. The archduke candidates must have already mentioned our willingness to comply, as our response was accepted without a hint of surprise.

"Gathering the necessary materials will not be a simple matter, so we do not expect you to give your names right away," noted the first wife. "However, it would be ideal for you to be treated as retainers of the archducal family sooner rather than later. Your attendants must be uneasy, and we intend to preserve their lives as well."

She went on to describe how the attendants we had brought to the Royal Academy with us would be treated. Matthias's report had driven a wedge between us and our adult attendants, and there was now constant pressure between us. Once we were the retainers of the archducal family, however, they would not be treated poorly. Furthermore, some had resolved to work hard in the presence of the archducal family so that their own punishments would be reduced. It was clear that they were taking great care to not dramatically disturb our lives, and that was relieving.

"This will not be until after you return from the Royal Academy," Aub Ehrenfest said, "but we will request your assistance as blood relatives to search the giebess' summer estates."

"Understood."

"That's all from me. You may leave. Except you, Muriella."

Hm?

It would have made sense for Matthias to stay behind as the reason all this was happening in the first place, but why me? I could only blink in surprise as I watched everyone leave, and a sudden loneliness washed over me.

Once everyone else was gone and the door was firmly shut once again, Aub Ehrenfest continued. "Muriella... Er, this is by no means easy to say, but your mother gave her name to the first wife of another duchy and was executed for fear of what danger she might represent."

Because my little brother was still so young, Mother had not met with Lady Georgine during her visits. She had not participated in the latest of Giebe Gerlach's meetings either and was apparently free of any and all wrongdoings.

"I realize you must think it unreasonable for her to have been punished without committing any crimes," Aub Ehrenfest continued. "However, I cannot trust a noble who will act according to the orders

of someone from another duchy. This was my decision as the archduke. I apologize.”

Unlike the other executed nobles, my mother was completely innocent. She was the only one who had been executed purely based on the future crimes she might have committed, and those in her family were not deemed guilty by association.

“You would normally not need to give your name, but...”

“Father took only my brother and rejected me, I presume?”

The aub hesitated for a breath and then said, “That’s right. Your father refused to accept you, saying that you are not his child. He returned you to your blood family—to Giebe Bessel, who had both given his name and attended the meeting. Giebe Bessel and his family have already been executed as a result of their crimes; only you and a pre-baptismal granddaughter of his remain. You have been brought down not due to your mother, but due to Giebe Bessel.”

The aub spoke with a bitter expression, but the only emotion that arose in my chest was resignation. I had completely expected this turn of events; my blood mother had been Giebe Bessel’s third wife, and she had given me to the giebe’s younger sister, who had been unable to have a child herself, soon after my birth. At most, I had spent just a year being nursed by my blood mother. After the birth of my younger brother, I was treated entirely as though I did not exist. It was far from unusual that Father had used this opportunity to refuse to take me in.

“You may be pained by these events, Aub Ehrenfest, but I am not shocked in the least. I expected that my father would cast me aside as well in his attempt to sever any and all ties to Giebe Bessel.”

“You may have expected this, but that does nothing to ease the pain.”

The aub was looking at me sympathetically—and somehow, I actually felt consoled. He was a truly sentimental person, although that could be both good and bad. On the one hand, he had been unable to control Lady Veronica for years, but on the other, he treated his adopted daughter, Lady Rozemyne, as an equal to his blood children and ensured that they all worked together.

“There is no need for concern,” I said. “Judging by how Lord Roderick has been doing as a retainer, I expect this future will bring me much more happiness than returning home.”

“There is still some work that must be done before this can happen, but... I intend to permit you to give your name to Elvira after you come of age. You are being forced to give your name, so it seems only fair that you should be able to serve someone of your own choosing.”

“I am deeply grateful for this consideration that few others would

have shown me.”

And so my conversation with the archducal couple ended with an agreement: I would serve as Lady Rozemyne’s retainer until my coming of age. My parents had always shouted at me whenever I tried to enjoy Lady Elvira’s books, saying that it was unthinkable for me to read something written by the Leisegangs. All of my reading had been done stealthily at the Royal Academy as a result, but no longer. Now, I could immerse myself in such books whenever I wanted.

“The plan is for everyone to greet Lady Rozemyne tomorrow, but there are some key points I think we should all discuss before you begin serving her.”

Following the archducal couple’s departure, Roderick had gathered together all those due to start serving the archducal family. We had not yet given our names, but from this point on, we were being treated as retainers—in a sense, at least. We were all members of the former Veronica faction, so Roderick had been selected to explain, as it would be easier for us to ask him questions.

“Going forward, as coworkers, we will all address each other without titles,” Roderick continued. “Do your best to maintain this even with Rihyarda and the other archnobles.”

It seemed that, on his first day, Roderick had struggled to omit the “lord” whenever addressing Hartmut. The situation had become a source of much stress for him, and I understood his feelings well; I was sure that I would struggle with the same. In that regard, it was a bit of a relief to me that Hartmut had already graduated.

“For now, Lady Rozemyne’s position is considered secure due to her engagement, and she is on very good terms with the other members of the archducal family. However, it is impossible to say what political shifts might change this. As an adopted daughter, she must continually prove her worth.”

That was the case for all families. After all, familial affection was nothing but an illusion—a transient veil of sand that would collapse from the lightest touch. I did not expect Lord Barthold or the others to agree, but I empathized with Lady Rozemyne for the life that had been forced upon her: prove your worth or be tossed aside.

She and I will also be able to discuss books, so I am certain that our relationship will be a good one.

“Lady Rozemyne is already hesitant to participate in tea parties for fear of disturbing those around her. Thus, we must take care to prevent her from learning that her apprentice attendants are seen as ill-prepared whenever she collapses and that points are deducted from their grades as a result.”

Roderick was speaking in all seriousness. In his words, Brunhilde

and Lieseleta were taking care not to add to the emotional burden that Lady Rozemyne was already having to carry.

“This next warning applies to both apprentice scholars and knights,” he went on. “Lady Rozemyne is already enduring enough pain from losing her guardian and striving to save children from the purge. Her attendants will not allow her to suffer any more, and to that end, they know no mercy. Be very careful.”

“It sounds as though you’re speaking from experience...” Laurenz said with a smirk. “Let me guess, Roderick—did you bungle something and get a stern talking-to?”

The light vanished from Roderick’s brown eyes, and his expression darkened all at once. “Lady Rozemyne asked me why not many apprentice attendants wished to serve her, but when I began to answer, Lieseleta forcibly silenced me with a waschen. Brunhilde dragged me out of the room soon after and gave me an angry lecture while Crushing me with all the might of an archnoble...”

Yes, I can imagine that..

I had personally witnessed Lady Rozemyne’s retainers bind a first-year with light and attempt to forcibly send him home to his potential execution. It seemed that their strict policy of eliminating anything that might trouble their lady extended not only to those of other factions, but to their coworkers as well. A scolding with that intensity must have been terrifying.

“You’ve gotten carried away and caused problems for yourself ever since you were young. I see you haven’t grown much,” Matthias observed.

Roderick grunted, his shoulders slumped. He had been the lowest in status even among those of the former Veronica faction and had always needed Matthias or Laurenz to protect him. I could not help but smile upon seeing that the bond between them existed even to this day.

“These tales of your failures will help us to avoid the same fate, at least,” I said, giggling. “Do you have any others?”

Roderick gave a sullen look. “Yes. Many. First of all, although it may be hard to understand things not at all rooted in common sense, it is crucial that you learn. For one, Lady Rozemyne does not value status. Leonore heads the apprentice knights here in the Royal Academy, but Damuel takes the lead in Ehrenfest.”

It was surprising to imagine a layknight giving instructions, but apparently that was normal among Lady Rozemyne’s retainers.

“Furthermore, regarding the printing industry and new trends, the thoughts of the commoners making the goods and the merchants selling them are valued above those of the nobility.”

“So she appoints a layknight to leadership and values the thoughts

of commoners over nobles,” Matthias mused. “I see. That explains why Father and the others looked down on her so much.”

Lady Gabriele had been very proud to have come from Ahrensbach, a greater duchy that was higher in status than Ehrenfest. Lady Veronica had inherited that blood, taken pride in her position as the archduke’s first wife, and attempted to bury the Leisegangs. As for the nobles who strove to raise their status as her retainers, well... Lady Rozemyne, with her appreciation of commoners and laynobles, certainly would not mix well with nobles of the former Veronica faction.

“You will all likely be visiting the temple as well. You will only need to go there once to see that things are nowhere near as bad as the rumors say, but until then...”

“I planned on visiting anyway, since my half-brother’s there, but... given how I’ve been raised, the first step’s definitely gonna take some courage,” Laurenz said with a weak smile.

It was openly said that the temple was a place for outcasts who failed to become nobles—a house not of the gods but of perversion and filth. Lady Rozemyne being raised there had made her seem base in the eyes of those of the former Veronica faction, who had said that she was unfit to be adopted by the archduke and that the Leisegangs had forced the aub’s hand.

“You will need to worry about your behavior more than the temple itself,” Roderick said. “Lady Rozemyne will not tolerate anyone looking down on the gray priests and shrine maidens or treating them poorly whatsoever.”

“She won’t tolerate it...?” Laurenz repeated. “I mean, they’re commoners, right? Can we at least keep our distance from them?”

“I once thought the same, Laurenz, and similarly tried to keep away from them. I was imprisoned by the common sense that had been drilled into me since birth and could not understand how Hartmut and Philine were happily going to the orphanage. Lady Rozemyne will not scold you for avoiding the commoners, since that is not mistreating them, and she will not force you to associate with them. However”—Roderick sighed, his expression now one of regret—“as I did not associate with the gray priests and thereby failed to earn their trust, Lady Rozemyne forbade me and me alone from entering the orphanage when an incident occurred. If you wish to truly serve her, then you will need to treat commoners and those of the temple as your equals.”

Hartmut was apparently of the opinion that “commoners and those of the temple are Lady Rozemyne’s arms and legs.” Nobles may have spread new trends, but it was the commoners who made them, meaning nothing could be done without them.

“Just as Lady Rozemyne treats commoners and gray priests well, she will also be considerate to the families of criminals. However, attempting to use your status as a weapon will only earn you her wrath. According to Hartmut... Lady Rozemyne cared nothing for Lord Traugott and got him to resign simply because he looked down on Damuel for being a laynoble, saying that he was not worthy to serve as a guard knight for the archducal family.”

“I’m glad you started serving her before we did, Roderick,” Matthias said. “We really will need to change our mindsets on just about everything.”

Indeed, our common sense was no longer common at all. My parents had always said that commoners, with their lack of mana, were nothing but leeches draining time and energy from the nobility—that we looked after them as one would a pet. In truth, there was so much that could not be discerned from an outside perspective. Just how unusual was it for an adopted daughter to have been raised in the temple?

There was a lot I would need to know before greeting Lady Rozemyne formally.

We had each completed our name-swearing and could now begin our retainer work in full.

Now I can finally read books as I please.

My first goal was to exchange thoughts with Lady Rozemyne’s retainers, who were in a position where they could read *Royal Academy Love Stories* before anyone else. I went to the retainers’ room and promptly approached Gretia.

“I happen to love *Royal Academy Love Stories*; what are your favorite stories from it, Gretia?”

“My apologies; I haven’t read it yet. I should get around to it since I’ve just become Lady Rozemyne’s retainer, but there are so many new jobs I need to learn...”

I had hoped that we could socialize as fellow newcomers, but oh well—I could just ask the others. I repeated my question to Lieseleta and Brunhilde.

“I find all of the stories to be wonderful. My heart melts for each one.”

“I have read them all, but my preferences depend on the person I am speaking to. Which are your favorites, Muriella?”

Lieseleta and Brunhilde replied with smiles. Their answers made it more than clear that they cared very little for *Royal Academy Love Stories*.

“To think apprentice archattendants need to change their favorites based on their conversation partner...” I said. “I, myself, am lacking

such dexterity.”

“Oh my. But such a skill is necessary for being an excellent host—and as you will be attending tea parties with greater duchies as well, Muriella, I would suggest reading not just *Royal Academy Love Stories*, but every book printed in Ehrenfest. Discussions with friends are one thing, but do not make your tastes so apparent during tea parties. You must focus on engaging with the guests’ topics of conversation and entertaining them.”

My attempts to spark a discussion about a book I enjoyed had only resulted in a lecture on how to behave during tea parties. This had not been my intention.

What a blunder...

After listening to this long speech with Gretia, I moved on to Judithe and Leonore, the apprentice guard knights.

“*Royal Academy Love Stories*? Well... it feels like with each volume, the chance of the protagonist’s love coming true goes up. I want my own accuracy to increase just like that.”

“Um...”

“Oh, sorry. I prefer the knight stories with a splash of romance to actual love stories.”

In other words, Judithe had no interest in the book either. I turned to Leonore next; she was engaged to Cornelius and actually in love, so surely she had a strong opinion or two. Perhaps she even used the book as a reference when having secret romantic rendezvous.

“Muriella. You wish to serve Lady Elvira because you love *Royal Academy Love Stories*, correct?”

“Well... yes.”

“Then take great care. Before you know it, you may find yourself a character within the stories you are trying to enjoy.”

“E-Excuse me...?”

She had given me this advice with a serious expression but said nothing about the book itself. As she turned her back to me, I realized that she, too, was not someone with whom I could discuss my thoughts.

How can this be? To think that her female retainers would be so disinterested in Royal Academy Love Stories...

“Roderick, Philine—as scholars, surely you understand the wonders of *Royal Academy Love Stories*,” I said. “The splendid whirling of the spring goddesses, the description of the pouring light, the exhilarating moment when the God of Darkness’s cape spreads within the gazebo...”

I saw the apprentice scholars as my last hope, but Roderick shook his head. “I study the text to learn writing techniques, but I’m not that interested in romance, so... I think those books are more for girls.

Really, what I want to know about are your thoughts on *A Ditter Story*.”

“*A Ditter Story*? I suppose our tastes do not mix...”

My apologies to Roderick, but I had not yet read that book. I was the kind of person who read her favorite stories over and over again, so I did not bother with those that were not to my liking.

“Philine—stories you gathered were turned into a book. You must take an interest, surely.”

“I do enjoy love stories, but I focus my search more on those similar to the ones my mother told me. I do not read them with the same passion as you, Muriella. Incidentally, Lady Rozemyne largely appreciates the stories as, um... What was the phrasing she used...? As ‘cash cows.’ She did not seem too absorbed in them and appeared to like the Dunkelfelger history book more.”

I had thought that becoming Lady Rozemyne’s retainer would allow me to discuss love stories. It had never even crossed my mind that literally nobody would be interested.

“I feel so disappointed,” I moped. “I was convinced that we would passionately discuss *Royal Academy Love Stories*...”

“If that is what you want, then perhaps I could introduce you to someone with more similar tastes,” Philine said, watching me quizzically as I bemoaned my fate. “My work gathering stories means I have connections with many apprentice scholars from other duchies. I can think of several who adore love stories just as much as you do.”

I gave a firm nod of appreciation. “As expected of an archduke candidate’s retainer. Please do introduce me.”

Up until now, my status as a member of the former Veronica faction had prevented me from joining anything connected to archduke candidates—and on top of that, all the apprentice scholars from other duchies with whom I was acquainted either wanted to borrow *Royal Academy Love Stories* or know what stories it contained. There was nobody I could actually discuss the book with.

No sooner had we arrived at the library than a female student wearing the cream cape of Jossbrenner came over. It was as if she had been waiting for us.

“Lady Philine, are you here because you are handing out more crest-certified work for Lady Rozemyne this year?” the girl asked. She was referring to the specific tasks that students could complete to earn themselves money. The name “crest-certified work” had stuck because on the work order detailing the student’s name and task was a crest seal to ensure they would receive payment.

“Yes, Lady Lueuradi,” Philine replied. “Lady Rozemyne is gathering stories once again this year. Oh, and allow me to introduce

you—this is Muriella, her new retainer. She has a particular fondness for *Royal Academy Love Stories*.”

“Oh my!” the girl—Lady Lueuradi—exclaimed with glee as she turned to face me. Her orange, almost-yellow hair swished gracefully through the air, and there was a distinct sparkle in her light-green eyes.

“Muriella, this is Lady Lueuradi, an apprentice archscholar from Jossbrenner. She is in the same grade as Lady Rozemyne and me, and we get along very well. She organizes crest-certified work in Jossbrenner on my behalf.”

Lady Lueuradi and I gazed into one another’s eyes as we were being introduced. We hadn’t spoken at all yet, but I could already feel a mysterious bond between us.

How should I put this? We are like... birds of a feather? Compatriots? Comrades in arms? Goodness, I can sense that we are of the same blood!

“Um... which is your favorite story, Lady Muriella?” Lady Lueuradi asked.

“She often says how much she loves the story of Dunkelung completing her engagement challenge,” Philine replied on my behalf. “I expect the two of you will get along swimmingly. Now, this seems as good an opportunity as any for you to discuss your thoughts on *Royal Academy Love Stories*.”

Philine encouraged us both to leave the reading room, so we started making our way to the scholar building.

How should I begin? Would it be wise for me to rave passionately about the stories? What if we do not share the same favorites...?

My heart was overflowing with the urge to speak, but my mind had gone completely blank. Perhaps the stern warnings of Lady Rozemyne’s other retainers had me on edge.

“L-Lady Muriella...! U-Um, I love the story of Dunkelung as well. What were your favorite parts?” Lady Lueuradi asked. I could guess from how her voice had cracked and the way she was eyeing me nervously that she was feeling the same tension as I.

My anxiety eased a little knowing that we both thoroughly enjoyed the same story. I decided to probe her tastes while eyeing her in turn.

“I am most taken with love stories where one does not give up on love even when their parents oppose it. Dunkelung overcomes many obstacles to get her engagement to her lover Herrschen approved. What do you like about it, Lady Lueuradi?”

“The way in which she prayed to Leidenschaft the God of Fire while working hard to achieve her dream of serving as a guard knight of the archducal family. Those descriptions are simply to die for. The author, Lady Elantura, has such a beautiful way with words...”

“I know, right?!”

I had cried out despite myself. “Elantura” was Lady Elvira’s pen name. I revered her so much that I genuinely wished to give my name to her.

“As the Gods of Summer prompted her growth, I could not help but feel that it was my first time seeing them as such welcome allies outside of the battlefield. My heart trembled when Dunkelung was enveloped by the blue flames of Anwachs the God of Growth.”

“There was also the bittersweet scene when she had to leave the Royal Academy despite it being the only place she could be with Herrschen. At that moment, I daresay I found myself praying to Ewigeliebe the God of Life alongside her.”

I repeatedly bobbed my head in approval of those thoughts. That scene had been so, so wonderful that I could repeat Dunkelung’s lines by heart.

“O my subordinate, may all that is be enveloped in ice and snow. Through mine efforts I shall entomb Geduldh, so do thine utmost to distance Flutrane.”

“That was it! Ah, how wonderful!”

From there, our conversation only intensified. We relocated to a room in the scholar building and even found ourselves shocked when sixth bell rang to tell students to return to their dormitories.

“To think it is sixth bell already...” Lady Lueuradi said. “It seems that Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time’s weaving was unfortunately swift today.”

“Indeed... But when might she guide us together once more?”

“I... happen to be free in the afternoon the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh, what a coincidence. As am I...”

We looked at each other and smiled, our plans made, then speedily started walking back to our dormitories.

“I can hardly wait for the next volume,” Lady Lueuradi said. “It will surely be filled with many more wondrous stories.”

“I cannot agree more. Ah, and this year’s volume had such a wonderful description of the God of Darkness’s cape being spread... I was blushing so fiercely that I actually had to close the book.”

Lady Lueuradi pressed her hands against her cheeks and gave a dreamy sigh. “Oh, how envious I am that you get to serve as Lady Rozemyne’s retainer.”

“I, too, consider it good fortune. I would not have had this opportunity otherwise.”

Even I was surprised by how blissfully fun it was to share thoughts with someone who shared my interests. For the longest time, I had assumed that the enjoyment of a book began and ended on the page, but gaining a friend with whom I could actually discuss the stories I so

enjoyed had done something wonderful. Fantasy and reality had suddenly come together.

To think that such joys could exist! I am so pleased that I chose to serve Lady Rozemyne.

Had I not, then I would not have had the means to connect with Lady Lueuradi, an archnoble from another duchy. Even if we had met by chance, without Philine there to give us such a prompt introduction, it would have been a very long time before we could discuss our passions so freely. Perhaps my world would expand even further once I gave my name to Lady Elvira and became more directly involved with making books.

I had entrusted my body to the pleasantness of hope—and upon returning to the dormitory, I picked up a book with entirely different feelings than usual.

Finding Purpose and the Guardians of Knowledge

“Hortensia, I am not the only one who wishes for you to go to the Royal Academy library; the king is in agreement as well. I am sorry to give you this duty, but please see it through.”

“As both the wife of the Sovereign knight commander and a Sovereign noble serving the king, I shall give it my all.”

After this exchange with my husband, Raublut, I went to the Royal Academy’s library alone with my attendant, as per the king’s wishes. My duty was to observe and defend against the suspicious behavior of a certain Ehrenfest archduke candidate, Lady Rozemyne, and search through the archive enterable only by royalty that she had carelessly described.

“I am Solange, a mednoble librarian. Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has granted my prayers and woven the threads of our fate together once again. I am glad to have the opportunity to work with you, Lady Hortensia.”

“Oh, Professor Solange. I did not think you were still in the library. How nostalgic.”

Solange had served as a librarian even back when I was attending the Royal Academy myself. There had been few opportunities for us to speak, given that I was an archscholar and she a mednoble librarian—but there had been some, owing to the fact that we were both from Klassenberg. We had both grown much older since then, but she welcomed me with the same kind, gentle smile that she had worn back in the day.

“Solange. New person?” came a curious voice.

“Schwartz, Weiss, this is Lady Hortensia,” Solange explained. “She is going to be working with us in the library from now on.”

One could not mention the Royal Academy library without thinking of Schwartz and Weiss, the large shumils who assisted its librarians. They were standing at their usual spot beside Solange and seemed as lively as ever. Seeing them made me feel as though I were a student again.

Dear, oh dear. I must be careful now.

I was at the library for the sake of my husband and the royal family, not to carelessly reminisce. I focused my mind as Solange led the way with Schwartz and Weiss.

“First, I will guide you to the dormitory.”

We went through the office and into the library dormitory, where Solange’s attendant, Catherine, was waiting for us. We exchanged greetings; then I introduced my own attendant, Edelina. She was the only one who had accompanied me—there was a rule about bringing only one attendant to the Royal Academy, and this applied even to staff—so she and Catherine would certainly need to work together in the dormitory.

“While your attendant prepares your room, we may finalize your contract in the office,” Solange said. “You have with you a letter from the king describing your assignment, I trust?”

“Yes, of course.”

We moved back to the office, whereupon I gave Solange the letter and signed my contract to start working as a librarian.

Once all that was done, Solange nodded. “You are now an archlibrarian, Hortensia.”

“May our work be fruitful, Solange,” I replied. Now that we were coworkers, there was no need for us to address each other so formally. Schwartz and Weiss followed suit.

“Hortensia. Welcome.”

“Hortensia. Working together.”

“Oh my. They are using my name... Schwartz, Weiss, I look forward to working with you both.” I was so moved that I extended a hand to them, only for Solange to hurriedly stop me.

“They acknowledge you as a librarian, but you have not yet received permission to touch them. Please avoid doing so for the time being. Only their master, Lady Rozemyne, can give such approval.”

“Ah, so they truly are owned by a student now. Word had already reached me, but is this situation not terribly inconvenient? Does it not impact your work?”

Solange gave me a somber look. “I was working alone, so no inconvenience was too much. But now we have an archnoble librarian. I shall inform Lady Rozemyne on her first day and have ownership changed to you. I will need to inform the royal family as well...”

“Speaking of which, how did a student such as Lady Rozemyne come to be their master in the first place? Raublut’s explanation was far from clear, either because he was not present or because he does not take an interest in the matter.”

My husband tended to give brief, easy-to-understand explanations, but on this one particular matter he had said something bizarre—that she had somehow become their master through a blessing. It was entirely incomprehensible. I had hoped that speaking with Solange would shed some light on the affair, since she had actually been

present, but her explanation was no more helpful.

In truth, I supposed that I owed my husband an apology. It was not his explanation that was incomprehensible but Lady Rozemyne's words and deeds.

"So, Solange—what kind of person is Lady Rozemyne?" I asked.

"She is very exceptional, as one would expect from someone who changed the shumils' registration through a blessing and without even touching them. She must be loved dearly by Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom."

My husband, the Sovereign knight commander, saw Lady Rozemyne as particularly suspicious, but Solange's perspective seemed to be that she was blessed with the gods' favor.

"Now then, allow me to give you a brief tour of the library. You cannot touch Schwartz or Weiss at the moment, so you are severely limited in the work you can do," Solange said, opening the door to the reading room.

The two shumils hopped in.

"This is the second closed-stack archive, where textbooks and old reference documents used in classes from before the civil war are kept. The reading material in here can be lent out to those who seek it, and students can enter as well," Solange explained. Although the articles were old and infrequently used—hence their being stored in the archive—there were occasionally guests who wished to see them.

As I perused the archive, a sentimental smile reached my lips. "I took this class myself. Oh, and this study guide was made by a friend of mine. The ones she made for Professor Griselda were especially popular. Oh, are Professor Griselda's documents here as well, by chance?"

"She was executed in the purge, so... her documents are not preserved."

"Oh my... That is a shame. Books and documents hold no sins."

So the purge had claimed written content as well. It was my first time learning this. Just how many books were now lost as a result? I sighed, continuing to browse the shelves, and found that one of my teacher's books was starting to rot.

"I thought there were magic tools in the library to prevent such deterioration..." I mused.

"I do not have the mana to run them by myself. But now that you are here, we should be able to run the repairing magic tool."

"Magic tools. Storage," Weiss said.

I followed them out of the second closed-stack archive. We cut through the reading room and made our way to a door under the stairs, which Schwartz opened.

"Here. Many magic tools."

“This is where we keep the magic tools used in our work,” Solange said, elaborating on the shumils’ terse explanations.

This room had been off-limits to me as a student, and it was exciting to think how much my position had risen since then. I stepped inside and saw an abundance of magic tools, the uses of which were unknown to me.

“There are this many magic tools for the library?” I asked.

“Indeed. We had three archnoble librarians before the civil war, with two mednobles providing them support. That is how many people were necessary to run this facility, so you can imagine the severity of our mana shortage.”

But the civil war had taken place roughly a decade ago, and Solange was but a single mednoble. It beggared belief that she had run this place alone.

“Did you not request more personnel...?”

“Oh, but here you are, Hortensia. Does your presence not mean that the royal family is finally concerned about the library? Or, perhaps, are you here because Lady Rozemyne activated Schwartz and Weiss, and asked the royal family for help directly?” Solange asked with a peaceful smile.

I am here because of the knight commander’s growing suspicions...

Unable to voice the true reason, I chose to keep my silence. Solange must not have noticed my reaction as she simply continued her explanation.

“The tools on this shelf are for preserving documents, while those over there are for repairing them. They are absolutely essential for the library, but I do not have nearly enough mana to run them all. Now that you are here, however, we are surely equipped to begin using them,” she said happily.

I nodded, looking at the tools. “Repair work, hm? I remember repairing the personal books of my lord at the time. I did not use small magic tools like these, however; I used the old, larger ones in the palace library.”

“What kind of work did you do, Hortensia?”

I stroked the repair magic tools. Perhaps because I was in the Royal Academy, memories that had not resurfaced in quite some time were coming back to me one after another. “Before marrying Raublut... I served Prince Waldifrid.”

Solange gasped in shock. My former lord was none other than the second prince whose assassination had sparked the civil war.

“I managed government documents and maintained the shelves in his villa,” I continued. “At times, he would ask me to repair his books or go to the palace library to search for documents. It was a bit like being a librarian, would you not say? At the time, I was so passionate

about my work that I had given up on marriage entirely. Or, to be more precise, it had seemed inconsequential to me. I was resolved to dedicate my life to serving Prince Waldifrid...”

However, my wish to live for my work had not been granted. The first prince had visited Prince Waldifrid and his family... then slaughtered them all.

“Retainers are relieved of duty following the death of their lord. At the time, I saw no reason to continue living. I was lost in darkness with no idea of what to do...” I squeezed my eyes shut and recalled the despair that had overwhelmed me back then.

Solange quietly took me by the hand and guided me out of the dark storage room into the bright reading room. “Could it be that Lord Raublut then saved you?” I could tell that she was trying to raise my spirits by directing me to warm thoughts of my husband, but her attempt was futile; there was no warmth to be had there.

“No. It was the previous Aub Klassenberg who saved me.”

“Oh?”

“The aub called for me and said that, once matters settled down, he would introduce me to the third prince. He granted me permission to mourn Prince Waldifrid and spend my days quietly cleaning out his villa while the first and third princes fought.”

“But the third prince...” Solange began, her voice cracking.

I gave a small nod and stepped in for her. “Yes. As you know, he was poisoned.”

From there, I had been moved to serve Prince Trauerqual, the fifth prince at the time. He had been raised as a vassal since birth, so his retinue had been smaller than that of any other prince. The previous Aub Klassenberg had called for the retainers of the second and third princes, alongside retainers of the royal branch families, to start gathering an entourage—and Raublut had been among them.

“I was told to marry Raublut to strengthen the bond between Klassenberg and the fifth prince’s retainers,” I went on. “I was still grieving the loss of my lord and struggling to find a purpose. At the time, I was pleased just to have been given a new duty to carry out.”

“Hortensia...”

“I apologize that this was not the love story you were hoping for. Oh, but do not look so down...” I chuckled as I strolled through the reading room. Raublut had similarly lost the one whom he loved and missed his opportunity for marriage, so the two of us had wed extremely late. Tragically, we had never been blessed with a child, and it pained me that I was not being useful to my husband as a wife should. “Just as I was beginning to think that I would die without a purpose, I was given this job so that I might aid both the royal family and my husband.”

My husband believed that the archive requiring three keys to open was the same archive that could only be entered by royalty. As there was a chance that this would provide information on how to obtain the Grutrissheit, the now ruling King Trauerqual had selected me as an archscholar to loyally and discreetly achieve his ends.

“I am sincerely glad—and proud—to have received this duty. Furthermore... as I walk among the bookshelves here, I recall the time I spent organizing the bookshelves in Prince Waldifrid’s office and visiting the palace library on his behalf. It makes my heart throb in a way that I seldom experience these days. My memories are certainly not all sad ones.”

Solange paced the reading room with me, wearing a smile that was just as proud and wistful as my own. “Oh yes, I understand exactly how you feel. Not all of mine are sad either.”

I was unaware of the library’s circumstances, but Solange had no doubt lost a great deal during the civil war as well. I could sense that much just by looking at her.

Two days after my arrival at the Royal Academy, classes began. The handover of Schwartz and Weiss took place at noon, and after a smooth procession, I watched as Lady Rozemyne and the royal family took their leave.

“You can finally touch Schwartz and Weiss, which means you can properly begin your work as a librarian,” Solange said.

“Indeed. Yesterday, I was busy preparing for the royal family’s visit and touring the dormitory.” I gently stroked Schwartz and Weiss. Not having my hands repelled cemented the fact that I was now a librarian.

“Hortensia, may I have a moment? You sounded a little harsh—rejective, even—when speaking with Lady Rozemyne. Could it be that Lord Raublut has told you something about her?”

“Yes, he is particularly suspicious of Ehrenfest. Yurgenschmidt needs no more seeds of conflict to be sown when it has not yet healed from the civil war. I am tasked with remaining on guard against Lady Rozemyne, whose goals and knowledge we do not know, and searching for this archive she mentioned.”

“What suspicions could Lord Raublut possibly have when I allowed him to borrow the very diary he saw her reading? Was there something inside to warrant this mistrust?” Solange asked, blinking in confusion. She had clearly thought that simply handing over the diary would clear Lady Rozemyne’s name.

“Lady Rozemyne borrowed the diary of an old librarian and asked Prince Hildebrand about an archive that only royalty can enter, did she not? Raublut found it suspicious that she would try to extract

information from the young prince rather than from Prince Anastasius or Lady Eglantine. Furthermore, we believe that this particular archive may contain a clue to the whereabouts of the Grutrissheit.”

“Oh my... Lord Raublut is doubtless overthinking things,” Solange said with a somewhat troubled smile. “Lady Rozemyne asked Prince Hildebrand simply because the matter came up during a tea party. You know of the various mysteries rumored to exist in the Royal Academy, such as the gazebo where the Goddess of Time plays pranks, or the moving statues of the gods, correct? One such rumor mentions an archive that can only be entered by the royal family. I can understand why those serving King Trauerqual would place so much focus on a clue that might lead to the Grutrissheit, but this is a bit much.”

I understood what Solange was trying to say. Indeed, once one knew the details of the situation, Lady Rozemyne really seemed quite innocent.

“It came up at a tea party, during a discussion of mysteries, hm...? Launching an investigation into Ehrenfest over something so trivial does seem a bit, shall we say, *neurotic*, and unlikely to bear fruit.”

“That said, I understand that investigating even the smallest of threats is Lord Raublut’s duty. He is the Sovereign knight commander, after all. If something has caught his attention, then he is right to look into it,” Solange said, offering me a sympathetic smile once I was more at ease. But her look of understanding soon gave way to one of complete seriousness. “That said, you are not a Sovereign knight; you are a librarian of the Royal Academy. Should you really be scrutinizing the students?”

I was trying so hard to be useful to my husband that I was neglecting my actual role here at the Royal Academy. Knights had their own duties, and so did scholars.

“I see what you mean,” I said. “I wish to be useful to the king and my husband, but I am not a Sovereign knight expected to investigate those behaving suspiciously; I am a librarian expected to maintain the Royal Academy’s library. I must adjust my perception and attitude accordingly. Henceforth, I intend to view Lady Rozemyne’s words and actions from a more professional perspective.”

“Indeed. Learn to know Lady Rozemyne by speaking to and exchanging books with her, if you would.”

It was important to learn about people through socializing—so my next question was a natural one. “Well then, Solange, what did the royal family do—and where—when they visited the Royal Academy in the past? What can be found in the archive that requires an archnoble librarian and three keys to open? Would you tell me these things? Truth be told, Raublut suspects that you may be hiding things as well.

You are not keeping information from us as a result of the purge, are you?"

Solange had spoken about the late librarians with such respect and sorrow, and her words had carried a certain loathing for the royal family responsible for the purge.

"Something occurred to me when Raublut said the royal family had visited the library during the Archduke Conference," I continued. "Prince Waldifrid was similarly due to come here with the king after his coronation was announced. I have always been under the assumption that it was merely part of the coronation ceremony, but perhaps there was another, more profound reason?"

The first prince had murdered Prince Waldifrid right before his kingship was announced to the public, so I had ended up never going to the library with him. However, Solange surely knew something. She would have been there to welcome him.

"My knowledge about these matters is highly limited. Come with me, though. I may not have information on this archive that can only be entered by royalty, but I do know of an archive that can only be opened by archlibrarians." Solange gave a sad smile, took me into the second closed-stack archive, and then rapped on a door at the far end. "The royal family would go into an archive behind this door whenever they visited during the Archduke Conference. I was told that it leads to a staircase, beyond which is a second door that can only be opened with the keys of three archlibrarians. I cannot verify this, however; as a mednoble, I cannot pass even this door."

As it turned out, not even the retainers of the royal family could pass this point without being archnobles.

"Is this not the archive that can only be entered by the royal family?" I asked.

"I would not think so. This is a very old memory, but I recall archduke candidates being able to enter as well. Furthermore... not once have I attempted to hide anything. In fact, during many an Archduke Conference have I asked for the king to come here."

I stared at her in surprise. My husband certainly had not said anything of the sort to me; he believed that Solange was consciously trying to keep the archive's existence a secret.

"But each time I was refused, as everyone was 'too busy with the Archduke Conference to come to the library.' I gave up after three years of that same response. Treating me with suspicion now would be terribly unfair."

There must have been some kind of misunderstanding between the royal family and those serving them which had prevented this information from actually reaching the king. As the wife of the Sovereign knight commander, I was well aware how disastrously busy

the royal family had been back then. At the same time, I understood how frustrating it must have been to be continually refused by your superior, especially when you were acting for the benefit of a group responsible for devastating your workplace.

“No one can criticize you, Solange. That said... it is my duty as an archlibrarian to open this archive and see what is inside. Might I ask where the keys are?”

“The key to this door is in the office, but those for the door beyond it are in the rooms formerly belonging to our archnoble librarians. Obtaining them will not be a simple matter.”

If we already knew the location of the keys, then why would we struggle to retrieve them? Solange must have deduced what I wanted to ask, as she continued to explain while leading me out of the archive.

“The library dormitory contains special rooms in which the keys are kept, but they can only be entered by guardians of knowledge contracted with Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom. The executed archlibrarians were all guardians themselves.”

“Guardians of knowledge...?”

“The term refers to those who have sworn loyalty not to the king but to Mestionora. I, myself, took the oath, but as I am not an archnoble, I am greatly restricted,” Solange said with a frustrated sigh.

This was all news to me. I quietly continued to listen.

“There are no records of the executed librarians’ rooms being searched after the purge. Tell me, did Lord Raublut not find that strange?”

“He did. In fact, he said that it was a matter worth returning to. However, the Sovereignty is truly short on manpower.”

My husband was on a lengthy deployment in another duchy, investigating the attack that had taken place during the Interduchy Tournament and the *ternisbefallens* that had appeared at the Royal Academy. As I was aware, he did not have the leeway to investigate an archive that might not exist or the rooms of archlibrarians executed a decade ago.

“They will never be able to do it themselves,” Solange informed me. “Knights cannot enter the room. At the time, the Sovereign Knight’s Order believed they could leisurely begin a search for evidence after carrying out the executions... but the knights were not scholars and thus could not form the necessary contracts, while I, myself, am a mednoble.”

“Could they not have brought an archscholar, then...?”

“Indeed. Naturally, the Knight’s Order thought the same. They brought an archscholar as a librarian and attempted to have them swear the oath to become a guardian of knowledge. However, said

oath requires one to be loyal to and faithfully serve the goddess, not the king. Do you understand the significance of this, at the time of the purge?”

Back then, Sovereign nobles from Old Werkestock were being thoroughly investigated due to their duchy having supported the first and fourth princes during the civil war. A demand had no doubt been made of the guardians of knowledge to swear their loyalty to the newly crowned King Trauerqual.

“They refused, as they had already sworn their loyalty to Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom. Bound by contract magic as they were, there was no other answer they could give. And yet, the times were unforgiving. They were accused of traitorous behavior among various other crimes and executed.”

It was hard to imagine anyone wanting to sign a new contract to search those rooms, especially when the previous occupants had been executed precisely because of their oaths. And as a person could not be forced to sign a magic contract, it only made sense that the rooms had not been investigated.

“So the keys that Raublut seeks are within the rooms of the guardians of knowledge?” I asked.

“The keys to the archive are, but whether they are the ones he is looking for, I cannot say.”

These were rooms and an archive that not even Solange had seen inside despite her countless years serving as a Royal Academy librarian. It mattered not whether one was a Sovereign knight commander or a member of the royal family—one could not enter without an archnoble librarian sworn to serve the goddess as a guardian of knowledge.

“I now understand why the Sovereign Knight’s Order could not search them, and why I was assigned to be an archlibrarian. It was all so that I could become a guardian of knowledge...”

“Wait a moment, Hortensia. Are you saying you will sign this contract, even knowing the circumstances?” Solange asked as if to stop me. “You can carry out your daily work here without becoming a guardian of knowledge. Even in the palace library, there are few who are sworn to the role.”

I closed my eyes and started weighing everything up. The words of my husband, the king’s desires, the joy of receiving a purpose, my previous wish to devote my life to scholarly work...

“My assignment here as an archlibrarian was in part the king’s wish...” I said. Both he and my husband, the Sovereign knight commander, wanted me to become a guardian of knowledge and develop a complete understanding of the library. Times had changed since the purge; neither of them would protest this contract. “I came

with the resolve to pour my all into this duty—as both the wife of the knight commander and as a Sovereign noble. I also believe in my husband. If signing a contract with Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom is necessary to obtain the right to enter every archive, then I shall do just that.”

Solange gave a conceding sigh and took an ivory slate from one of the shelves in the office. Then she guided me up to the second floor and over to the statue of Mestionora.

“Will you truly make this oath?”

It seemed to me that Solange, holding the stone slate, looked exactly like Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom with her divine instrument Grutrissheit in hand. I could tell that she was a loyal apostle of the goddess and a true guardian of knowledge.

“I will.”

“Then use stylo and write this text upon the base of the statue. Once you do this, there is no going back.”

The slate in Solange’s hands was carved in truly ancient language. I took out my schtappe, turned it into a pen, and then carefully copied out each letter.

I am a guardian of knowledge.

I am one who swears loyalty to Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom.

I shall devote all knowledge born in Yurgenschmidt to Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom.

I shall spread throughout Yurgenschmidt the knowledge gifted to me by Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom.

I respect the wisdom of humanity and shall ensure its protection.

I swear not to falter before authority, to remain courageous in the face of might, and to continue seeking and gathering knowledge, which I shall offer to the goddess.

The words I had written shone and were then sucked into the divine instrument that Mestionora was holding. At that moment, I could have sworn that her statue smiled at me. A key then appeared from the divine instrument in her hands and dropped to the wide base of the statue with a clatter. I had seen magic contracts burst into golden flames before, but never had I witnessed a contract with the gods such as this.

As I stared at the key in a daze, Solange smiled. “That is yours.”

At her prompting, I extended a hand to the key that Mestionora had granted me. The moment my fingers touched its metallic surface, it was sucked into me like a schtappe.

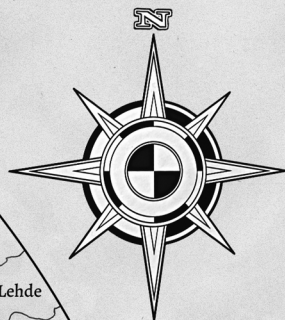
“O Hortensia, new guardian of knowledge. We welcome you.”



(Formerly) Zausengas Border Gate
Under Klassenberg Management

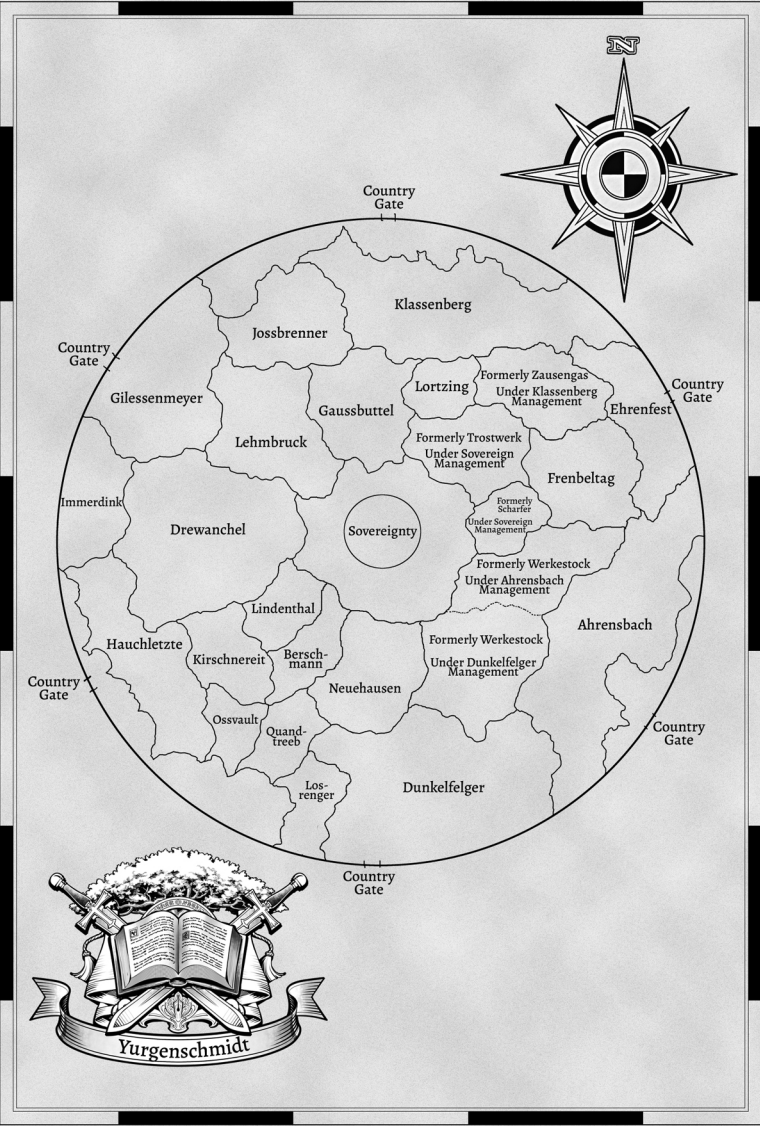
Frenbeltaag Border Gate

★
Ehrenfest
Central District



Country
Border Gate

Ahrensbach Border Gate



Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Volume 1*. Thus begins the final chapter.

The prologue for this volume was written from Hildebrand's perspective, though this one wasn't exclusive to the light novel—it was in the web novel as well. The prince's engagement was announced at the same time that he was debuted during the Archduke Conference, and as he was mulling in dissatisfaction over his future, Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander, gave him a magic tool.

Rozemyne became a third-year, and while the purge was being carried out in Ehrenfest, a lot happened in the Royal Academy. Students of the former Veronica faction gave their names, rituals for obtaining the divine protections of the gods were performed, and the specialty course finally started, leading to a much different experience than before. It seems that more things are happening around Rozemyne each year, so it's no wonder that Florencia read all the reports with her head in her hands!

The epilogue was written from Lestilaut's perspective. His relationship with Rozemyne started with a battle over Schwartz and Weiss, then gradually changed through their litter game, the creation of the Dunkelfelger history book, his hairpin order, *A Ditter Story*, their joint research project on religious ceremonies, and then the dedication whirl. However, will that change be a pleasant one for Rozemyne...? As this was a chapter about Lestilaut, his retainers' names were mentioned, but you don't need to remember them if you don't want to. They won't have much to do with the main story.

The original short stories in this volume are from Muriella's and Hortensia's perspectives.

In Muriella's short story, I wrote about how the nobles of the former Veronica faction who had to give their names view Rozemyne and the other retainers. I hope that Roderick's explanation and everyone's reactions helped you to realize just how strange Rozemyne really is.

Through giving her name, Muriella was able to make a new friend. Time passes in the blink of an eye when discussing a book you love with someone who feels the same, does it not? Their conversation may have been tricky to understand due to the many religious

metaphors, but that should give you an insight into why Rozemyne does not feel motivated enough to discuss *Royal Academy Love Stories* with other people. As for those of you who actually managed to decipher it all, well, maybe you'd have an easy time becoming Yurgenschmidt nobles! (Haha.)

Hortensia's perspective described her past and her reason for coming to the Royal Academy. In a sense, she knew what had happened at the beginning of the civil war, but she wasn't that familiar with the middle.

After losing her reason to live, Hortensia was given a new role by her husband and the king. She resolved to become not just a normal librarian but a guardian of knowledge, hoping to give herself a purpose once again. The previous archnoble librarians and guardians appeared briefly in *Royal Academy Stories: First Year*, so I would recommend those of you who are interested to give that a read.

In this volume, the four characters to receive designs were Hortensia, Fraularm, Muriella, and Gretia—all women. Hortensia is a true beauty with a warm appearance, making her very much the quintessential Klassenberg woman I was envisioning. Fraularm looks as though she's hung on wires and always on the verge of hysterics, and just looking at her face should give you an idea of how shrill her voice can be. Muriella has the homely cuteness of a girl who reads by the window. Gretia is cute and has big boobs, exactly as I ordered. She's sensitive to looks from boys and is naturally a lot more on guard as a result.

This volume's cover art shows Rozemyne at the ivory plaza where she obtained her *schtappe*—a place that one would normally reach through the guidance of the gods after obtaining one's divine protections. Given the occasion, I asked for Part 5 to begin with an image showing an important location.

For the color illustration, I asked for the shiny, sparkly dedication whirl. Rozemyne was too focused on trying not to unleash another blessing to realize, but her whirling was mystical and ethereally beautiful—which I think was captured perfectly in the image.

Shiina-sama, thank you as always.

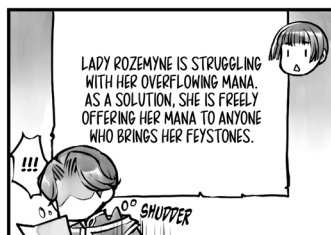
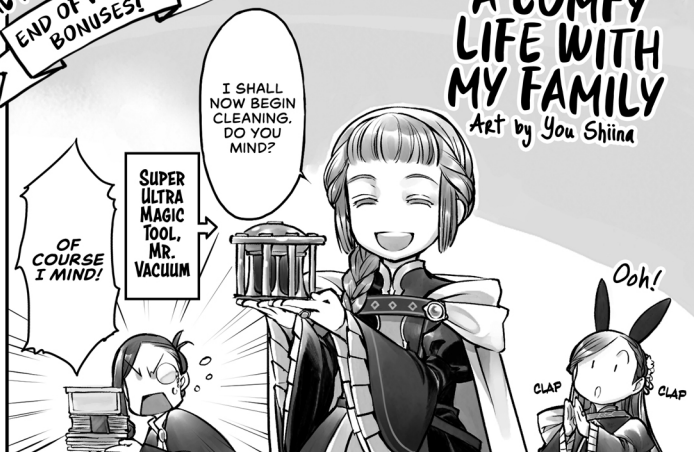
And finally, my utmost thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 5 Volume 2.

January 2020, Miya Kazuki

THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME
BONUSES!

A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY

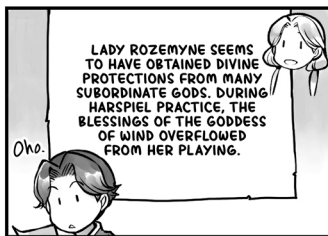
Art by You Shiina



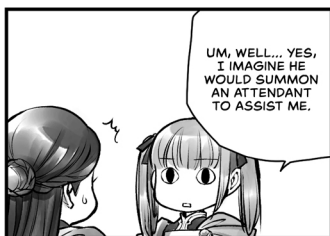
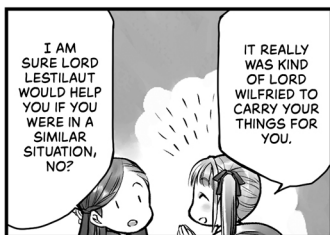
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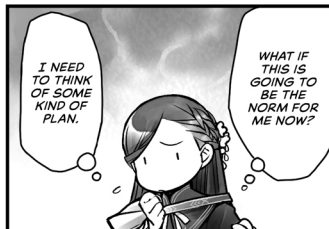
ROZEMYNE



VACANT EYES



GREEN ENERGY



The 3rd ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM Character Poll!

Part 5, the final chapter of the series, finally begins! Here we announce the twenty characters who scored the most votes in our most recent poll. Those in the Royal Academy took a huge leap forward!

*This poll was held from December 9th, 2019, to January 10th, 2020, on TO Books' official Bookworm home page.

Total number of votes:
16,300!



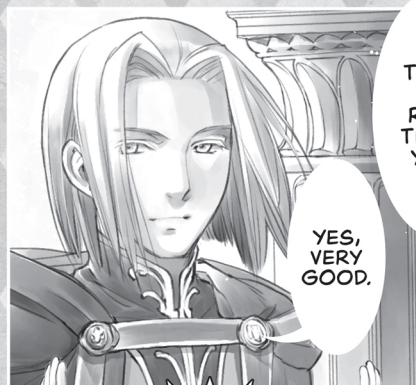
Ferdinand

4,038 votes



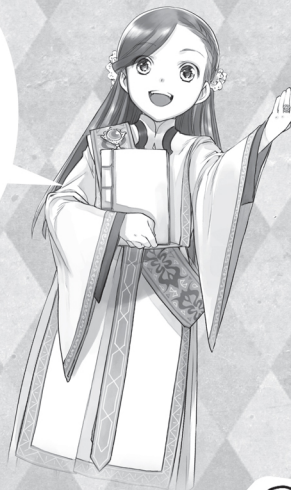
Rozemyne

6,580 votes



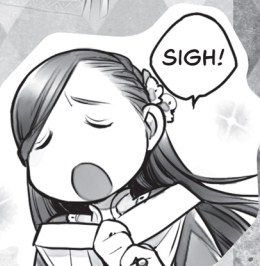
YES,
VERY
GOOD.

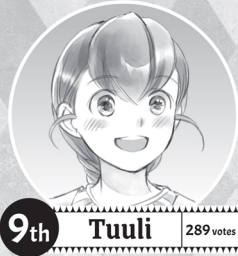
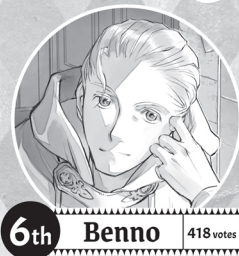
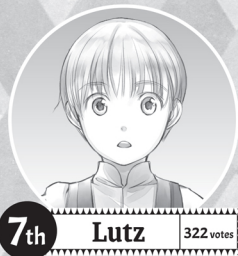
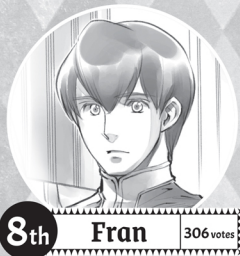
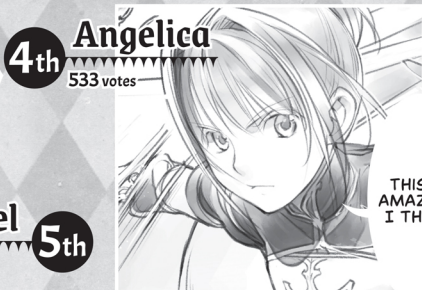
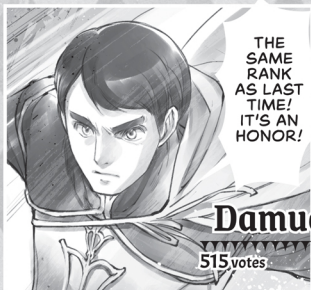
TWICE
IN A
ROW!
THANK
YOU!



Hartmut

587 votes





11th	Justus	241 votes
12th	Hannelore	229 votes
13th	Cornelius	203 votes
14th	Elvira	158 votes
15th	Charlotte	138 votes
16th	Matthias	133 votes
17th	Lieseleta	119 votes
18th	Letizia	96 votes
19th	Philine	92 votes
20th	Sylvester	63 votes

*** Comment from *
Miya Kazuki**

Here are the results of our third poll. First and second place sure have an overwhelming lead, don't they? Rozemyne picked up speed after the midway point of the voting window and secured the top slot for the second time! I wonder, will Ferdinand get a chance to reclaim the crown...? That said, the protagonists always take the spotlight. Hartmut ranked sixth last time, and that was before he'd even received a character design. Now he's made his way up to third. Angelica also went up quite a lot from her previous rank of seventh. She sure has a lot of dedicated fans. The stable and consistent Damuel maintained his position at fifth. Sixth place and below is filled with the lower-city gang. The anime may have influenced that. Thank you for all the enthusiastic support.

*** Comment from *
You Shiina**

I didn't expect the top two to change, so I've decided to focus on third place and below. It's nice to see Angelica up in fourth. I love muscle-headed beauties, so this is something to celebrate as far as I'm concerned. And now, after ranking so highly in the previous poll despite not having had any art, Hartmut's claimed third place! He actually has an illustration this time. Congratulations, Hartmut!

Thank you all for taking part!







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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Volume 1
by Miya Kazuki

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Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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